

Finally Forever by [caffeinatedcollectorduck](#)

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Summary: Everything that happens after Hopper finds Eleven

1. Chapter 1

It was just before dawn on New Years Day when Eleven finally revealed herself to Jim Hopper. Unable to sleep, the man had decided to head back into work much earlier than he was expected to be there, anticipating some sort of crime having happened in the mere five hours since he'd been on duty. Jim made his usual morning stop at the edge of the woods much earlier than he normally did, placing two waffles and a tin of leftovers into the small wooden box he'd left there. He'd been doing this twice a day ever since David Johnson stepped into the station talking about the 'little boy in a dress' he saw sitting by a fire in the middle of the woods. It'd been almost a month now, but Jim was never truly sure who took the food. Hopper lingered a moment over the box, glancing around to check for any sign of footprints. There wasn't, but snow had been falling all night, so he wasn't surprised. Sighing with cold and worry-if he was cold, she must be freezing-the man stood and began the trudge back to his car. He was almost there when he heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps crunching fresh snow behind him. Hopper froze in his place, turned around before he lost the nerve, and was shocked to see her standing there, like a little ghost. Her eyes were wide, her cheeks were sunken in, and she was shivering under Johnson's stolen clothes; the hat barely hung onto her head. the coat dwarfed her. Underneath, Hopper could see she was still wearing the same dress as when he last saw her, but the white shoes and socks were now torn and stained, her birdlike legs covered in bruises and goosebumps.

Jim took off his hat, making sure the girl recognized him, and tried to summon a smile. "Hey, kid. Do you remember me?"

Eleven only stared for a moment, finally giving him the tiniest nod in return.

"It's pretty cold out here, do you wanna sit in the car and warm up?" Her eyes widened at the offer, but she didn't budge. Her uneasiness was tangible; just because she recognized him doesn't mean she was getting into a confined space with him. Jim hated seeing her standing in the cold like that, frozen to the bone and probably scared to death, he had to find some way to get her in the car. Remembering the

blanket he kept in the far back, Hopper retrieved and showed it to Eleven. "I have a blanket, too."

That reeled her in. The child took a tiny step forward, then another, and soon Jim was passing her the blanket, noting her raw, red hands as she gently took it from him. He opened the door for her she clambered in slowly, weakly. Hopper started the engine and aimed every vent in her direction. Thankfully he hadn't been gone long, and the car was quick to heat up again. Eleven held her fingers to the heat, sighing heavily. They sat like that for a while, watching the sun rise over the New Year. This had been the first time in years that Hopper hadn't been passed out drunk on the holiday, while the child had no idea of its existence. Why the hell was she awake so early in the morning anyway? Hopper contemplated asking her, but he didn't think he'd get an answer, so he dropped it. When the girl finally stopped shivering, Jim turned to her, spotting with relief that her cheeks had regained some color; the tip of her nose was bright red, reminding him that Christmas reindeer.

"I have somewhere else we can go that's warm, and it's safe there. Do you want to go?" Hopper asked, biting the inside of his cheek. It'd taken enough negotiation to get her into the car, and he was worried this would take even more.

Eleven thought for a moment, then nodded. Anywhere was better than the cold, unforgiving woods, and if he said it was warm and safe, she was inclined to believe him. This man had done nothing but help her thus far, and though she definitely didn't trust him yet, she didn't think he was lying to her either. Besides, if he tried to hurt her, she could just as easily hurt him, too.

"Okay, let's go." Jim put the car in drive, and they were off into the sunrise, tire tracks already being covered with fresh snow.

Hopper had put premeditated thought into where the child would stay if he wound up finding her. His own home had never been an option, and before he'd remembered the cabin left to him by his grandfather, Jim actually debated on bringing Eleven right to Joyce instead of possibly harboring her, though he hadn't even told her that the child might be alive. The girl had responded so well to the woman—really the only adult she'd connected with at all, though

understandably so-and Joyce naturally felt protective of her. But she had enough on her hands, still recovering from losing her son, really still trying to get him back, that Hopper didn't consider that option for long. He could care for her himself, or at least he was determined to try.

Throughout the duration of the car ride to the 'warm and safe place,' Eleven sat silently in the front seat, her eyes focused straight ahead. It was only the third time she'd been in a car before, the first times being on the way to Will's house, and then to the middle school before their battle with the Demogorgon. It was her first time alone with this man, however, though she'd met him once before when he revealed that he knew the location of the Gate. He had also been bringing her food for the past several weeks-she watched him. She hadn't intended to follow him, she didn't even realize her feet were moving until they were moving fast, jogging down a slope after losing sight of the man when he rounded the corner. Eleven's limit of ignoring her natural instinct for human connection could not be pushed any further, this man was trying to help her and she could no longer ignore him; she was far too cold and hungry. Winter was in full swing, and the snow had begun falling again in heavy flakes when she first spotted the man approaching the box he normally left food in.

It wasn't that Eleven minded the snow; the first sight of it had actually made her laugh, really laugh, something she hadn't done in recent memory. What she did mind was the cold, and the sudden disappearance of the animals she relied on for food. It was much harder to start a fire, as was building any kind of shelter. But even in her coldest moments she could still admire the beauty of snow, especially when it was falling at night. The world was perfectly quiet those times, so still and soft. Eleven felt protected by the white blanket covering the earth, as if no harm would come to her in these moments even if her fingers and toes felt like they might fall off. But here, in the heat of this man's car, her extremities had begun to regain some sensation, and her shivering had mostly subsided. For the moment she was warm and safe, and she tried not to think too far ahead in attempt to relish it.

She's so tense, Jim thought to himself as he cast furtive glances at

Eleven. Her posture was impeccable, her back more taught than a rubber band stretched to the point of almost snapping. She didn't glance at him though, and Hopper thought she was probably still adjusting to seeing another human being for the first time in weeks. He didn't push her, didn't ask her any questions or try and get her to speak, and Eleven was grateful for it; she hardly knew Hopper, and she had absolutely no idea how to make idle conversation. But when the man pulled the car to an abrupt stop in the middle of the forest, the child finally dared to look at him, suddenly terrified as to where he was leading her. The Lab, the Bad Place, it was in the middle of the forest, and this man knew where the Gate was, so he knew how to get to The Lab, too. Was he taking her back there?

Hopper noted her fear immediately and tried quickly to think of something to ease her distress over the situation. "Don't worry, kid. We're just leaving the car here, we can only get to the house on foot."

The house on a foot? What was he talking about? Eleven's eyes narrowed in confusion, but her fear was slightly eased because he'd said they were going to a house. She knew that the bad place was not a house because Mike lived in a house, and so did Will, and those places were nothing like the bad place. She liked the houses, and desperately hoped the man was taking her to something similar.

The girl's confusion had confused Jim, too. How much of what he said did she really understand? Was she capable of even expressing that she didn't understand something? In total, Hopper thought he'd heard Eleven speak maybe twenty words, and some of them she'd just been directly repeating. It struck him suddenly that her lack of communication skills had the potential to become a problem, and he tried to think of something he could say to make the child understand that he wasn't going to harm her, that he wanted more than anything to help her and keep her safe. Maybe I don't have to say anything, Jim thought. Maybe I just have to show her.

Hopper stepped out of his car and motioned for Eleven to follow him. The child was still hesitant, not knowing the man's true intentions, and remained still in the front seat-it was warm there. Heaving a sigh, Jim trudged through snow around his car to open the passenger side door. At this, Eleven nearly jumped out of her own skin and lurched away from him, fearing that the man might try to physically

remove her from the vehicle. Hopper had no such plans. Instead, he knelt to her height and tried to smile encouragingly. "When we get inside I'll start a fire to warm you up, okay? There's a bed, and blankets, and I'll get food."

Eleven was still suspicious, but the offer of warmth and food tempted her. She'd gone with this man for a reason, and he had been feeding her, maybe she shouldn't assume the worst of him. Maybe he was telling the truth. Slowly, she raised her eyes to meet his, if only for a split second. Hopper outstretched a hand in hopes that the kind gesture would gain her trust. Instead, Eleven looked at his hand like it had teeth, and carefully avoided touching his arm as she stepped out of his car. Well, at least she finally got out.

It was somewhat of a long walk to the cabin and Hopper hadn't been there in years, so the path wasn't only totally covered with snow, but also completely overgrown with hidden branches, bushes, and sharp rocks. Jim was fortunate to be wearing long pants, which protected his legs against the invasive spikes he trampled with his heavy boots. Eleven, however, was not so lucky. While her upper body was nicely covered with a thick coat, the knee length socks Mike had given her offered her bare, cold legs very little protection. Her worn out shoes didn't do much to keep out the snow, not to mention they were too small; her ever growing feet had easily begun to tear holes in the wet fabric. Due all in part to her ill fitting shoes, cold exposed limbs, and the obstacles hidden in the snow, it wasn't a surprise when Hopper heard the child trip behind him, falling hard and landing on her hands and knees. Jim rushed to help her up, but when he touched her arm, the girl recoiled in fear. Hopper stepped back, and Eleven quickly stood on her own, brushing the wetness from herself and continuing forward. She was cold and hungry, and the sooner she reached the house the better.

The door hadn't been locked, but instead frozen shut. Hopper had to kick the thing down, something that both startled and exhilarated Eleven. This man was strong, and whether that fact was good or bad eluded her at the moment. Once inside, Jim quickly cleared out the fireplace and began breaking down wooden boxes for firewood, something else he did with his feet. It wasn't until Eleven slowly approached him to observe that he noticed a bright red blotch

staining one of her socks. Hopper dropped the task at hand and turned to the girl, his expression full of worry. Only Mike had looked at her like that before, and for a moment Eleven feared she was in trouble. But this man didn't seem mad at all, he seemed concerned. For her? Shyly, she met his eyes, waiting for him to speak.

"What happened?" Hopper asked, though a split second later he knew the answer. Why had it taken him so long to notice that she'd hurt herself when she fell? Did she have other injuries he was unaware of? He was suddenly filled with shame; why hadn't he checked her physical condition first thing? "Come here," he said, striding into the cabin's quaint kitchen. Jim shook off a dusty rag and turned on the sink, shocked when water actually came out. Not only did the place still have power, but the pipes weren't frozen either. Eleven had followed him this time, but only because he was headed into the kitchen, and she knew that was where food was kept.

Hopper rung out the rag and turned to the girl, who's sock had soaked up even more blood. Without warning, he reached forward and grabbed Eleven by her underarms, lifting her to sit on the kitchen counter. The child was shocked when he picked her up; she'd only been held once before that she could remember, and the sensation of being off the ground like that was new to her, as was this man. She was about to squirm down and away when he gently reached out and began to take off her shoes. While doing so, Jim silently noted that the laces were held together in one simple knot; Eleven did not know how to tie her shoes. When Hopper peeled off her bloody sock and began to gently wipe off her wound, Eleven realized he wasn't going to hurt her, quite the opposite actually. Jim didn't know it, but that was the moment she first began to trust him.

After he got a fire going, Hopper rummaged around the cabin and retrieved a dusty blanket, shaking it off as much as he could. Eleven was crouched by the flames, her hands slightly outstretched to feel the warmth, but not too close. Jim startled her when he placed the blanket over her shoulders, but she took it graciously and gave him the tiniest hint of a smile in return. While she warmed up, Hopper tried his best to somewhat clean the place up. He pushed all the storage boxes against one wall, then brought the small couch close to the fire so that the kid didn't have to sit on the ground. He sat beside

her to rest for a moment, but was interrupted by the sound of the child's grumbling stomach. Eleven had been in such a hurry to chase after the man that she'd forgotten about the food he'd just stashed for her. She regretted this now, but didn't have the courage to ask this man for more food; it was her own fault she was hungry.

Jim was hungry too, and cold despite the fire. There weren't many blankets here, and he didn't have enough wood to keep a fire going for much longer. He had to leave, he decided. He had to go get supplies and he couldn't bring the kid with him, she'd have to stay here. Hopper bit the inside of his cheek, trying to find the best way to tell Eleven that she'd have to stay in this brand new place all alone while the only person she knew left.

Hopper turned to her earnestly. "So listen Kid, I have to leave. Just for a little while, to get food. Then I'll come back. And you can stay here while I'm gone." Jim tried to break this news to her as gently as possible.

What he didn't realize was that Eleven had been left alone in others' homes before, and that she didn't mind all too much as long as it meant he was coming back with food. She simply nodded and turned her attention back to the fire, still trying to warm her fingers. Hopper took this as a good sign and decided to leave before she changed her mind. He didn't worry she'd run away; after all, she'd chosen to come with him, he hadn't forced her. "I'll be right back, okay?" Again, the child only nodded, not even bothering to turn away from the fire and face him.

Jim was reminded of his duty as the Chief of police when he started the Blazer outside, the bright red clock on the dash reading 8:57am. He was due at the station in three minutes. The man actually laughed; once, loud and ludicrous, before picking up the radio and calling Flo.

"Hop?" the woman asked when she came on.

"I won't be in today, Flo. Sorry." he said, not even bothering to come up with an excuse.

"Wild night, I assume." she replied.

Again, Hopper laughed, remembering that the night before had been a holiday. "You have no idea."

"See you tomorrow, Chief."

Realizing then that it would be odd for him to call into work but show up minutes later at the grocery store just up the street, Hopper drove in the direction of his trailer. There wasn't much he needed to get today anyway, and he had enough food of his own to hold them over until tomorrow. Upon arrival, Jim stocked the back with firewood, then forged through the rest of the house. All the food he had. Soap, towels, blankets, pillows. A toothbrush, toilet paper, clothes for himself. It dawned on him then that Eleven only had the clothes on her back, which consisted of a pink dress, an oversized winter coat, a hat, socks soaked with blood, and shoes that could barely even be classified as shoes anymore. Hopper didn't have any children's clothes-he'd thrown all of Sara's away in a fit of rage after her death-and even if he'd still had them they would never have fit Eleven; though she probably would have been thin enough to squeeze into Sara's forever size eights, she was taller than his daughter had been. Jim made a mental note to pick up some clothes for her when he could, but for now packed his smallest shirts and a pair of thermal long johns that might fit if she rolled them up enough. Tossing everything into the backseat, Jim took off in the direction of the cabin, hoping that nobody was watching him.

During her time alone, Eleven explored every square inch of the tiny house, something that didn't take long. She discovered a room with a massive bed inside-it was a double, but she'd only ever seen a single-so large that she could lay flat in the middle and stretch her arms and legs as far as she could, still unable to touch the edges. She spent some time jumping on the bed as well once she discovered there were springs inside. Growing tired, Eleven forged through the kitchen in search of anything to eat, but of course found nothing. She settled for a drink of very cold tap water, which eased her hunger slightly but only added to a different problem. Fortunately, said problem was resolved when she located the cabin's bathroom. Upon entering, Eleven was filled with relief that she would no longer have feel like an animal, living and doing absolutely everything outside.

Eleven was in the bathroom when Jim returned, and he immediately

noted her absence. He dropped everything he was holding and began to frantically search the cabin for any sign of the child, the only evidence he found of her presence being the unclosed kitchen cabinets she'd obviously snooped through. Hopper's heart leapt when he heard movement from the bathroom, and without thinking, barged in. This, of course, scared Eleven half to death, who was standing at the sink washing her hands for the first time in weeks. When the man barged in, the child jumped halfway to the ceiling, shooting sink water everywhere. Quickly regaining her composure, she turned off the tap and slowly looked at the man, her eyes not missing the patches of water that now adorned both herself and the entire bathroom. She would definitely be in trouble over the mess she'd made.

But to her surprise, the man just started laughing. Eleven had never heard a grown adult laugh before, but she knew that laughing was good, that it meant he wasn't angry. She breathed a sigh of relief and managed a tiny smile herself. Jim sighed too; he was sure something had scared the kid enough for her to make a run for it. His laughter came from relief as well, both that she was safe and that he'd caught her just washing her hands.

"Don't worry about it, Kid. We're gonna get this mess under control right after we eat."

She followed him into the kitchen, where Hopper cleaned it up enough to cook the child toast and sausage. She devoured the meal in mere seconds, but declined when he offered her more due to her shrunken stomach. The rest of the day was spent mostly organizing the small cabin, including a peek through his ancient record collection, a lesson on morse code, and how to use the TV, stove, and oven. The sun had set by the time Hopper placed the final box in the loft, looking down with a sigh of finality at the little girl staring up at him. It was then he noticed how filthy the girl was, covered head to toe in dirt and dust. He descended the ladder and retrieved the bag of clothes he'd brought from his trailer, sifting through them to find some he thought might fit her.

"It was all I had, I'll get you some real clothes soon." he promised the child as he passed them to her.

Eleven took the clothes from him and immediately attempted to undress, completely forgetting what Mike had taught her about privacy; she was cold, wet, and had been wearing the same dress for over a month, so she couldn't wait to get the thing off. When Hopper saw the child start to take her clothes off he was momentarily shocked at her immodesty, but then remembered. She'd grown up as a test subject, and it made sense that, as a result, she lacked the understanding of most social norms. Of course, Jim still turned around, but seconds later felt a tap on his back. Very hesitantly he faced her, but to his surprise, the girl was still in the dress. Eleven couldn't get it off; the thing was buttoned up the back and she couldn't undo them herself. Not sure how to ask the man for help, Eleven simply turned her back to him and pointed to the buttons. Jim understood immediately and unbuttoned the three it had, silently wishing she'd spoken to him instead. But there was still a problem: the dress was drenched, making it impossible to remove, even with the loosened buttons. Eleven was struggling to pull it over her head, and Hopper paused for a moment, unsure of what to do. Would it be inappropriate for him to help? He assumed many people had seen the girl unclothed before because obviously she didn't care, but Jim still had reservations; he didn't know her and she didn't know him, and the last thing he wanted was to make her uncomfortable. It wasn't until Eleven pulled so hard on the dress that it began to tear that Hopper decided to step in.

"Can I help?" He asked tentatively. If she wasn't uncomfortable, Jim decided, neither was he. After all, he'd had a daughter before, and it wouldn't be weird unless he made it weird; she was just a kid. Relieved, Eleven nodded vigorously. Hopper helped her out of the dress, and when it was off the child threw it to the ground with force as if to say 'good riddance'. Hopper had to smile, but then suppress a frown when he couldn't help but notice how skinny the little girl was.

When Eleven was dressed, Hopper stepped into the bathroom to stock the place with the supplies he'd brought. He suddenly realized that Eleven didn't have a toothbrush, and added that to the mental list of things he needed to get for her. Jim was shocked when he emerged, sure for a moment that an animal had just torn through the cabin. In the minute Eleven had been left unattended, Hopper found the refrigerator door wide open, and seated on the couch was a child

dressed in oversize clothing with wild hair, ripping a box of Eggos to absolute shreds and stuffing her mouth to max capacity. Despite everything, Hopper thought she looked adorable; her dirty hair matted down from the hat, his shirt falling clear to her knees, the long johns rolled up fifty times but still too big. Her little face was spotted with dirt, and he couldn't help but realize how much she needed a bath. But it had been a long day already, and through the mask of hunger Jim could see how exhausted the kid was. Her eyes had dark circles underneath them, and when she blinked the action was drawn out and uneven.

Hopper retrieved more wood from his car and began building up the fire again, Eleven still seated on the couch to watch. Her eating began to slow, and she felt herself finally relaxing. The new clothes were soft and clean, and the fire was putting off enough heat to warm the whole cabin. For the first time in a long time, she felt truly safe. While the man was adding more wood, Eleven layed her head on the armrest of the couch, the constant knot in her stomach finally loosening. By the time Jim was finished the child was fast asleep, a half eaten box of waffles still in her grasp.

2. Chapter 2

Jim carried the child to bed and tucked her tight with blankets, then fell asleep himself on the couch. He woke when Eleven stumbled out of her room at-what *fucking* time was it, *four am!*-and into the bathroom. He remembered how early he'd found her the day before, and how early she'd fallen asleep, and suddenly it made sense. He'd have to keep her up later tonight, get her on a more normal schedule. Groaning still, Hopper roused himself from the couch and started making coffee. When she emerged from the bathroom, Jim noted that the girl looked much better this morning. Her under-eye circles were dissipating, and she appeared alert even after just waking. She sat on the couch and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, watching him with wide, curious eyes.

Opening the fridge, Hopper scanned over it's contents. He had three eggs, some milk, and a loaf of bread in the cabinet. French toast it was. "You hungry, Kid? Want some breakfast?" She nodded eagerly. Of course she was hungry. "Okay, it'll be ready soon, sit tight."

Eleven didn't know how to sit tightly, but she stayed on the couch as the man began cooking. But when delicious smells began wafting through the cabin, the child moved to stand just outside the kitchen, intently watching Hopper's process with anticipation.

"Go ahead and sit down, it's almost ready" Jim said, gesturing to the table.

As he brought over their plates, the child snatched one out of his hands immediately. Eleven began eating before he even sat down, her fork left untouched. Again, Hopper was unsure of what to say or do. *Jesus*, he thought. *She takes such huge bites, the shit is halfway gone already, it would be useless now to ask her to use the fork. Does she even know how to use a fork?*

Her breakfast was gone quickly, leaving Eleven's face and hands a sticky mess. She was filthy already, Jim remembered, and was glad the moment had presented itself in this way; he didn't want to have to tell her she was dirty, but the syrup made it easier.

"Do you want to take a bath to get the syrup off?" Hopper asked.

Eleven raised an eyebrow in confusion, an action Jim didn't know she was capable of. She definitely did not want to go into The Bath, but she wasn't sure that's what the man meant. She thought maybe he was referring to a shower, something she *was* familiar with. She did need one, her unclean appearance hadn't been lost on herself.

Jim understood her confusion right away when he realized that her perception of a bath was probably much different than his. How could he explain this to her? Remembering the previous night's dilemma over getting Eleven out of the car, Hopper decided to show the child rather than try to explain. Finishing his breakfast, the man stood from his seat and beckoned for the child to follow him into the bathroom. She did, and once inside, Eleven understood exactly what he'd meant. This bath was the same as the bath at Will's house. But...was the man going to make her find someone? She knew Will wasn't stuck in the Upside Down anymore-she had looked-but was there someone else trapped there now? The thought made Eleven take a step backwards, and Jim bit his lip in nervous anticipation. He'd hoped the girl wouldn't be weary of bathing, but of course, her captors had made her fear that as well.

"This bath is just for getting clean," Hopper said, knowing full well what she was afraid of. "You don't have to find anyone, just get the syrup and dirt off." Eleven only stared at him, still rooted to her spot. Jim sighed. "Here, I'll fill it up and you'll see."

Hopper made the water as warm as possible and sat on the edge of the tub, attempting to show her that there was nothing to fear. He remembered Sara's first time at a public pool and how scared she'd been. They'd coaxed her into the water bit by bit, starting with just dipping her feet in, until she was comfortable.

"Why don't you start with just your feet?" Jim tried. Eleven shook her head. *Shit!* He wasn't going to force the kid into the tub, but he didn't want her to remain filthy either. "What if I put my feet in too?" This got her attention, so he continued. "You can sit right next to me and we'll do it together."

Eleven took a deep breath. She *really* did not want to get into the

bathtub, but one look at her dirt-caked hands made her realize that she couldn't put this off forever. The child took the tiniest step forward, then another, and soon she was propped on the edge of the tub next to the man. His feet were already in the water, but she couldn't bring herself to join him. Jim knew this was hard for her; he'd seen the large water tank next to The Gate, and after Eleven found Will in the school gym, he'd put two and two together that the kid was used, probably forced, often for that purpose. Seeing her uneasiness over this bathtub further enforced his hunch, and made him more understanding to how long this might take.

"I'm right here, I won't let anything happen." Hopper told the child. He wasn't sure his words of reassurance would help, but apparently they did, because Eleven slowly slid one foot into the water, then the other. "See, there you go! Good job!"

Good job? Eleven knew what 'good' and 'job' meant, though not together. But by his tone of voice, the girl could tell the man was pleased with her. The water wasn't so bad, it was much warmer than any Bath she'd ever been in. The warmth tickled her ankles and sent chills up her legs, and she suddenly wanted more than anything to be enveloped in it completely. The child stood, and before Hopper could stop her, she sat down in the bathtub fully clothed.

The man was laughing again, and though Eleven wasn't sure why, his happiness brought a grin to her cheeks. Jim pulled his feet out of the water and stood up beside the tub, smiling down at the girl. "Technically, Kid, you're supposed to take your clothes *off* before a bath because you're trying to clean your skin."

That made sense. While she was always wearing something in The Bath, she never took a shower with clothes on, and showers were for getting clean, just like the man said *this* bath was for. Eleven stood up, peeled her clothes off, and dropped them in a wet pile on the floor. Jim took that as his cue to leave and started to, but before he could take two steps he felt himself momentarily frozen in place. When it passed, Hopper slowly turned around to look at the girl, who was still standing in the tub and now had a line of blood trickling from one nostril. Eleven shook her head at the man and slowly sat, making sure he did not attempt to leave again. Her non-verbal message was loud and clear; she may have been comfortable enough

to get in, but definitely not enough to be left alone.

"You don't want me to go?" Hopper asked. Another head shake, and another sigh as Jim sat heavily on the floor beside the tub. "Okay, I'll stay."

Once Eleven realized the man wasn't going to leave, she slowly began to relax, eventually leaning her head back against the porcelain. Jim handed her a washcloth and bar of soap, pleased that the girl knew how to wash her own face and body. She did not, however, know how to wash her hair. Hopper wasn't surprised by this-she'd probably never *had* hair to wash before-and while he was unable to coax the girl to completely submerge her head, he did get her to lie flat on her back. After more negotiation, she allowed Jim to massage soap into her knotted hair. Eleven hoped this man would not make her cut it again, but she didn't think he would. By the time he helped her wash the soap out, the water had gone cold and the girl was ready to be done.

When she was out of the bath, Hopper helped Eleven dry and brush her hair. She was also out of clothes again, and the best he could do at the moment was give the girl one of his oversized T-shirts, which she didn't seem to mind. The sun had risen by then, and Hopper knew he couldn't miss another day of work without inciting suspicion. As Eleven sat down at to resume work on a puzzle she'd started the day before, Hopper sat next to her and came right out with his announcement, knowing that the child understood bluntness better. "I have to go to work today, in a little while actually."

Eleven simply nodded. She understood that most kids went to school almost every day and that adults went to work, so this hadn't come as a surprise, though she silently wondered if she would ever get to go to school.

"While I'm gone, be careful making food and remember our rules, yeah?" Hopper said, looking the girl in the eye. Again she nodded. "I'll be home at six." He said this assuming she knew how to tell time, but by the look she gave him he knew he was mistaken. Motioning Eleven to the morse code machine, Hopper pointed at the digital clock adorning it, the numbers now reading 8-3-7. Eleven was familiar with clocks, Mike had given her his watch last year. Hopper

remembered, too, that she had taken a watch off before allowing him to help her into the pool.

"I'll be home by the time this clock reads 6-0-0, six o'clock." Jim said. Eleven nodded. She was bummed that he had to go, but she would be inside a nice warm house, able to watch TV and eat whenever and whatever she pleased. The man made for the door, grabbing his hat from a nail off the wall. "Remember our rules, and maybe don't eat all the Eggos, okay Kid? I'll make dinner when I get home." The girl nodded again, and Jim smiled as he shut the door, waving goodbye. As he walked to his car, he wondered how Eleven would entertain herself.

The child spent the day watching TV and completing the puzzle she'd started. She was very familiar with puzzles; they were the only form of play or entertainment Papa allowed her in the lab because he claimed they were good for her brain. *Papa only liked my brain*, Eleven thought. She fiercely hoped this man cared about her as a person like Mike had, not just a weapon or prize. Papa was only nice to her when he wanted something from her, was that why this man was being so nice? What did he want from her? She still didn't have a name for him. The boys had referred to him by something before, but she couldn't remember. The minor events from that night were fuzzy in her memory, pushed aside by the more remarkable moments.

The day went on slowly, with Eggo breaks and bed-jumping scattered throughout. While Eleven missed the man's company, she was pretty content. The thing she longed for most were her friends. Eleven sensed they were worried about her, especially Mike, and yearned to see them again. She wanted to ask the man when she could see them, but remembering the bad men surrounding Mike's house made her think twice. Maybe it would be best to wait a while. The man had done so much for her already, too, that she didn't want to ask any more of him at the moment. Plus, if she waited a little longer to see Mike, her hair would have more time to grow. The thought made her smile, and she wondered what she would look like with longer hair.

When Jim knocked on the door that evening, Eleven slid open the locks without moving from her spot. She was standing over the record player, intently listening. She loved to watch the record spin and hear the crackle-popping sounds it made. Her favorite part was

placing the needle, something she did often because she'd already found a favorite song and had been playing it on repeat while he was gone. When Hopper came in, however, she stirred from her position at the sight of his grocery bags. Remembering what he'd said about making dinner upon his return, Eleven joined him in the kitchen to watch. Jim encouraged her to help, and the child enjoyed the cooking lesson. She dove into her dinner, fork momentarily forgotten, but made the man smile when she did remember.

After dinner she took a bath, something she now decided she loved and could do on her own. While she bathed, Jim began configuring the alarm end of the tripwire he planned to set up tomorrow, carefully placing a gold bullet into a hole drilled in a mousetrap. It didn't take long, he finished his task before the child was out of the tub. When Eleven returned to the bedroom wrapped in a towel, she found the man already in there, putting assorted clothing into the dresser. Hopper smiled when he saw the child's expression. Eleven hadn't really worn clothes until meeting Mike, and now she had a whole dresser full of her very own. She grinned back at the man as he spoke to her.

"I don't know how well they'll fit, but they should work better than mine. There's pajamas in here too," Jim said, revealing a red and black checkered set. She gave him her telltale confused expression, and he quickly elaborated. "Pajamas, clothes just for sleeping. Here, feel," He passed them to the girl, and she was sure she'd never touched anything softer.

Eleven opened all the dresser drawers, then proceeded to try on every article of clothing he'd brought her. There were even new socks and shoes, and they didn't squish her toes! Among her favorites were pants that hooked over her shoulders, and a very warm green coat that wasn't way too big. She didn't know how to operate the odd metal string that was attached to the jacket, however, but Hopper knew what to do. "I have something else for you too, when you're done trying these on." he said after he helped her unzip the jacket.

When Eleven exited the bedroom wearing the new and slightly oversized sleepwear, she was in for another shock. The table in front of the couch was covered in what appeared to be small, rectangular boxes. The man was holding one, and he patted the couch cushion

next to him. She sat, and Jim passed her the object. It wasn't a box at all, but pieces of paper stuck together with words, lots of words, written on them. While Eleven did have some basic reading and writing skills, as well as simple math, she had never seen a book before.

"I was thinking," The man said, snapping her attention back to him. "Maybe tonight I could read one to you before you went to sleep."

Jim had never seen someone react so enthusiastically to such a simple offer. Eleven's eyes lit up with wonder and instantly Hopper knew she'd never been read to a day in her life. At that moment he made a silent vow that he would read to this child every night for as long as she desired.

"You can pick whichever one you want, then we can go into the bedroom and read it." Hopper said, indicating that he wanted the girl to fall asleep in there tonight. She complied immediately, scooping the first book she saw off the table and retreating into the bedroom. By the time Jim joined her, Eleven was already beneath the covers, a small excited smile tracing her lips.

Eleven picked a chapter book, and at first Hopper wondered if he should explain to her that she probably wouldn't understand what was happening in the story, that maybe it would be better to pick a different book. But he'd told her she could pick whichever one she wanted, and he didn't want to go back on his word. Besides, how would she ever understand anything new without exposure to it? Pulling up a chair beside the bed, Jim opened the book and began to read. Most of the words *were* a mystery to her, but Eleven still found herself completely engrossed in the story, and Hopper read her two chapters before he noticed the girl beginning to rub her eyes. It was late evening by then, and Hopper figured he'd kept her awake long enough, that hopefully she wouldn't wake at the crack of dawn again.

"We can read more tomorrow, yeah?" Jim said.

The child nodded in agreeance and slid out of bed, freshly socked feet pattering to the bathroom to brush her teeth with her new toothbrush Hopper brought her. This, thankfully, was something else he did not have to teach her. Jim was beginning to think of Eleven as an

unfinished puzzle, the missing pieces representing the gaps in her haphazard education. While she could perform basic human functions-feed herself, dress herself, bathe herself-she was still missing fundamental portions of those functions. Eleven could feed herself, yes, but she had a hard time using a fork and spoon. She could dress herself, but had no idea how to use a zipper. She could bathe herself, but had never washed her own hair before. In many ways, Eleven was more advanced than many children her age. There were things she seemed to understand without needing an explanation, like how to find people using only a radio, or start a fire in the woods without ever being shown how. But when the kid struggled to tie her shoes and cut her own food, Hopper was reminded that in many ways, Eleven really *wasn't* like other children her age. There were holes in her development, and sometimes she seemed like a normal eleven or twelve year old-he didn't know for sure, she was so damn small-but other times she seemed more like a three year old.

And after Jim tucked her in and told her goodnight, Eleven reacted the way a three year old might when he stood up to leave; by grabbing the end of Hopper's shirt and refusing to let go.

"I'll just be in the other room, Kid. I'll leave the light on and the door open." he said.

"No."

"No? No what?" Jim replied, hoping to coax more out of her. He could count the number of words she's spoken since he found her on one hand.

He got two. "Don't go."

"You want me to stay here until you fall asleep?" The girl nodded, and Hopper smiled softly. "Then you should probably lay down and close your eyes, yeah?"

Instead, Eleven narrowed them in suspicion. What if he left when she closed her eyes? While the child didn't speak much, her body language was very easy to read, and Jim knew immediately what she was thinking. Slowly, so that his action wouldn't surprise her, Hopper

reached out and took her hand in his. Eleven was frozen, not in fear, but anticipation, and for the first time since he found her, didn't pull away when he touched her.

"Just hold my hand and close your eyes, I'm not going anywhere."

Eleven met his eyes briefly, slowly. "Promise?"

Hopper nodded and squeezed her fingers gently. "I promise."

It took a painfully long time, but finally, what seemed like hours later, Eleven was asleep. Jim carefully disengaged his fingers from her iron grip and plopped onto the couch with the intention to watch TV, but instead just leaned his head back and sighed with relief. He was exhausted, but triumphant as well. Hopper felt like he was finally making progress with the kid, and it seemed like they had even settled into a routine. Jim fell asleep sitting up, comforted by the idea that this might not be as hard as he thought it would.

That thought vanished when he woke with a start in the middle of the night, triggered by a blood-curdling scream. He tried to stand, but the couch was shaking, as was every other object in the house. Were they experiencing an earthquake, was that why the kid was losing it? But when he stumbled into the bedroom, Hopper knew right away that no earthquake had caused this. Eleven was curled into a tight ball against the wall, the bed beside her a complete wreck. Her little face was flushed, she was sweating profusely in her thick pajamas, and blood stained her upper lip. As Jim approached her, he found that the child's eyes were still squeezed shut, and when he reached out to touch her she screamed and pulled away, causing the entire house to shake again.

"Eleven, it's me, it's Hopper. You're alright, Kid, I'm here. I'm right here, just, just try to wake up." How long would this go on? Would the house be totally destroyed by the time she was out of it? What could he do to prevent this from happening again? He sat on the bed beside her, afraid to touch her again. Instead, Jim repeated his previous phrases over and over, hoping desperately that he was doing something right.

The soothing words slowly brought her to consciousness. Suddenly,

Eleven's eyes snapped open and she gasped for air, unaware she'd been holding her breath. She frantically gazed around the room, noticing the fallen objects. Where was she? Who was this man sitting next to her, who was reaching down to *grab* her! Eleven screamed in panic, but an instant later Hopper was lifting her into his arms. At first she was petrified and almost threw him across the room, but as soon as she heard and felt the steady heartbeat in his chest, she began to relax. Slowly, things came back into focus. Eleven remembered this man now, the one who had fed her, read to her, and held her hand until she fell asleep. The one that had been keeping her safe. All at once, the terrified little girl, stiff as a board, wrapped her arms and legs tightly around Jim and heaved a sob into his shoulder.

Hopper had never heard a child cry so hard before. Not even Sara, during the worst of her treatment, ever sobbed like that. Eleven's cries were filled with fear and guilt, fear stemming still from her nightmare, and guilt for not only waking the man up, but also destroying the house he'd worked so hard to clean up for her. Why wasn't he angry with her, why was he holding and comforting her after what she'd done?

"Calm down, Kid. Just breathe. You're right here with me." Jim repeated.

Slowly, Eleven came to realize that he wasn't mad at her, that she wasn't in trouble. Her cries began to subside, and when the hiccups were gone, she tentatively lifted her head from its place on his shoulder and met his eyes. For the first time, she didn't tear them away a second later.

Jim wasn't used to staring down into brown eyes; not only did Eleven almost never look at him directly, but he was more familiar with seeing Sara's bright blue ones. He was suddenly thrown back in time to comforting his own child after her bad dreams, and felt the familiar pang in his heart whenever he remembered his daughter. This time, though, when he thought of Sara but looked at Eleven, the pain wasn't so overpowering. In that moment, they were comforting each other.

"Hopper?" Eleven said, her voice small but thick with emotion.

"Yeah?" Jim replied, assuming she was going to ask him a question.

Instead she shook her head and tapped his chest twice. "Hopper?"

Then he understood, and felt immediate shame. Jim had spent nearly three days caring for the kid in every way; feeding her, keeping her clean and warm, teaching her everything he could think of, but had neglected to give her a name to call him. How could he have forgotten such a simple introduction? Why did he think that just because he knew her name that she would know his?

"Yeah, Hopper. That's me." he told the girl, gently and slowly reaching up to pet her hair.

Not many had ever touched her comfortingly before. Sure, Papa held her hand when they walked through the halls of the lab, but that was because he wanted to keep her at his side. Hopper petting her hair, that was something new, something *great*. The child, having hardly received positive and compassionate parental affection before, was totally and completely caught off guard by it, but also absolutely receptive to more. Jim sensed this when the girl carefully placed her head on his shoulder and tightened her grip on him. Then slowly, like a wild animal cautiously taking food from an outstretched human hand, Eleven pressed her forehead to Hopper's neck and pulled her chest against his, feeling and hearing his strong heartbeat echo her own. The effect was immediate; Jim suddenly felt the child go limp as she relaxed in his arms, and just minutes later her breathing was even and deep. Fearing another nightmare, Hopper slept the rest of the night with Eleven asleep on his chest, and for the first time in years, felt the warmth of love pull at his heart.

3. Chapter 3

The next morning, Eleven helped Hopper clean up the cabin and set up the tripwire before he left for work. He explained firstly that he wasn't at all angry about the mess or the nightmare, that sometimes those things happen and that it was okay. Setting up the tripwire went well, she seemed to understand its purpose. After laying down the ground rules he'd come up with the night before, he began readying himself for work. Jim was worried about leaving the girl alone after the events of the previous night, but when he told her he was heading out, she reacted the same way she had the day before; with a nod of understanding.

When Jim returned that evening, Eleven actually unlocked the door manually. She'd been anticipating his arrival, in part for dinner, but mostly his company. She bathed after they ate-now a routine-and wanted a book immediately following. It was still early, so Hopper read to her on the couch. Midway through a chapter, however, Eleven got up without word and strode to the record player. Jim was confused; he looked up from the book and cleared his throat.

"You don't want to read anymore?" He asked. After some thought, he'd come to the conclusion that speaking to the child in questions would further prompt her to answer, and hopefully verbally.

Jim's attempt worked. "No." she paused a moment before adding, "Music and book."

"You want to listen to music *and* listen to me read?"

Eleven nodded as she carefully placed the needle on vinyl-she only verbalized if it was necessary to get a point across.

Hopper was puzzled but acquiesced to her request, picking up where he left off. He read for a few minutes and waited for the girl to come back to the couch, but she remained in front of the record player, watching it spin as Jim knew she liked to do. Was she even listening to the story at all? Hopper ceased reading mid-sentence and assumed it would take the child a few moments to realize he stopped. Surprisingly, Eleven turned around the second he halted. She raised

an eyebrow at him, wondering why he'd paused, and gestured for Jim to continue.

"Are you actually listening to the story?" Hopper asked.

Eleven had heard the term 'are you listening' many times. Papa and the bad men always wanted some kind of response when they spoke to her, and if she didn't give one, it was automatically assumed that she wasn't listening. This was, however, the opposite of the truth. Eleven was *always* listening; her sole purpose for existing was to listen! So when Hopper wanted to know if she was paying attention to the story, she was slightly annoyed, but quickly righted herself. Hopper didn't know the bad men had pounded the distaste for that question into her. All she had to do was show him that she was indeed listening, and was more than capable of paying attention to multiple things at a time.

"Three turns...after cha...chapter." Eleven said, unsure of how else to get her point across.

Jim did not understand. He was about to ask her to elaborate, but then remembered how much easier Eleven operated by doing rather than saying. "Will you show me what you mean?"

The child returned to the couch and took the book from him and flipped three pages back from Hopper's marked page, revealing the start of the chapter. Eleven looked back at Hopper and repeated her previous statement. "Three turns after chapter."

How had she heard him turn the pages from her distance *and* over the music? Jim was dumbfounded at the child's ability to focus attention. She was still looking at him expectantly; she still wanted him to read. Stunned, Hopper took the book from the girl and began where he'd left off. Eleven rose from the couch the moment he started again to return to the record player, and Jim read to her until they'd listened to both sides. He didn't know how the kid was still on her feet after last night, but she seemed fine. *Maybe she sleeps while I'm gone*, Hopper thought. It's what he would have done to pass the time.

After a small nighttime snack, Jim tucked Eleven into bed, but only read her one more chapter because he had long since grown tired of

reading. He stayed until she fell asleep, faster than the night before. Hopper retired to the couch and was asleep in minutes, but was woken again later by Eleven's dreams. This became a regular affair; three to four times a week, the little girl would cry out in the night and Hopper would go to her. He would hold her tight as she sobbed into his chest, rubbing circles into her back until she fell back to sleep. It was exhausting for him, but Jim could only imagine how much more exhausting it must be for her. The child-though unintentionally-often used her powers in her sleep, and by the time she woke up, it felt like adrenaline was coursing through her blood.

Within the first few weeks, Hopper and Eleven developed an unconscious schedule. They would cook breakfast together before he left, and while he was gone, the girl alternated between watching TV, listening to music, jumping on the bed, and attempting to read one of the many books in the house. She only read when there was nothing interesting to watch because most of the stories were beyond her understanding, and she knew this, and it made her feel stupid. By the time Hopper returned home, Eleven was usually bored and starving to death, so the first thing they did was always eat. Then the girl would have a bath, Hopper would have a cigarette and a beer, and afterwards they would watch TV or a movie from Jim's personal collection. Finally, Eleven would brush her teeth and crawl into bed, where Hopper would be waiting with her book of choice. He usually read until he noticed the girl yawning or rubbing her eyes, at which point he would cover the bedside lamp with a blanket to dim the light, signaling Eleven to prepare for sleep. It took anywhere between fifteen minutes to an hour for Jim to get her down, and by the time he was done he was too tired to think about doing anything else. He often fell asleep watching TV, but would always wake to Eleven's nightmares.

They learned a lot about each other during that time, and the child's idiosyncrasies never failed to fascinate the man. Eleven wanted to touch *everything*, especially very rough or soft textures. Anything new Hopper showed her, the girl always had to examine it physically first. She didn't like certain things to touch *her*, however. Eleven hated the wool blanket Hopper wrapped her in one night before they watched a movie, she'd flung it off the moment the fabric touched her skin and itched furiously at the places it had. The girl also despised washing

the dishes because touching wet food was almost unbearable for her. Fortunately, Hopper noticed this right away and let her stick to drying. Food overall was interesting as well; for the first few days he allowed her to eat mostly Eggos and other junk, but on their fourth day he served her real dinner. Chicken and pasta, something easy and generally enjoyed by most, however Eleven was suspicious of the unfamiliar food. She had stared up at Hopper wide eyed, and he knew exactly what she was thinking.

"I thought we'd eat something besides Eggos tonight. If you try a bite I think you'll like it." Jim said. Aside from the three ground rules, he never gave the child any direct instructions. After growing up without a say about anything in her life, Hopper knew that she needed to learn to make her own decisions. Additionally, he wasn't sure he'd gained enough of her trust to *tell* her to do something yet. If she really didn't want to eat it, he'd just have to figure out something else.

Eleven studied the food closely, poking it once with a curious finger, then leaned over her plate and took a whiff-she did that a lot too. Deciding it smelled good, she picked up her fork and speared a tiny bite. Hopper had been right, she did like it, especially because after the meal was finished she felt fuller than she did after her average carb-exclusive diet. Though she was carefully observational of every new food Jim offered her, unless it smelled absolutely terrible-steamed green beans and peas-she usually tried it and usually liked it. Eleven was a voracious eater, probably making up for all that lost nutrition after living in the woods, and who knows what she was given in the lab.

The child lacked manners entirely and had no concept of social cues, having never been taught of their existence. She ate at lightning speed, but sometimes half the meal ended up on her face, hands, chair, and floor. The girl chewed with her mouth open, wiped her dirty fingers on her clothes, and once, early on, Eleven even reached across the table and took food off of Jim's plate after finishing hers.

"Hey Kid, if you want more food, you just gotta ask me, yeah?"

A nod. "Yes."

".....*Do you want more?*"

"Yes."

She didn't make eye contact very well, and often didn't acknowledge Hopper's speaking unless he was asking her a direct question, and even then she still sometimes ignored him. If they were both watching TV and she didn't want to anymore, Eleven would simply turn it off without asking. She walked away from him while he was talking, and Hopper figured that meant the girl had either lost interest in what he was saying or his answer to her burning question had been sufficient enough.

She was very sensitive to sound. The volume on the record player was kept incredibly low, and Hopper could barely hear the TV when she watched it; the first time he turned it on she'd nearly jumped to the ceiling, covering her ears with her hands and grimacing. Jim's voice sometimes startled her if she wasn't prepared for him to speak, so he made an effort to touch her hand to signal the start of a conversation, though that often startled her, too. While Eleven's speaking voice was clear and easy to understand, she was very quiet, and Hopper wondered if this was related to her distaste for loud noises or was just simply part of her personality.

Sleeping was...they were working on it. Eleven would only fall asleep if Hopper sat with her, and sometimes it took awhile. However, she did go to bed relatively early-usually around eight thirty or so-and though she didn't nightmare every night, many she did. Not only was the child filled with adrenaline when she first woke, usually crying and clinging to Hopper, but she was terrified to go back to sleep afterwards. The pair often watched the sun rise throughout the small cabin together, the man sometimes half asleep and waking himself up whenever he began to snore. Despite the difficulty surrounding bedtime, once Eleven was fully asleep, she was *out*, something Hopper discovered one night shortly after putting her down. While washing the dishes, he accidentally shattered a plate on the tile flooring, the noise echoing throughout the small cabin. He winced at the sound, prepared for a panicked little girl to wake up and come barreling out of her room frantically-'*what happened?*', a question often asked-but she didn't. Upon inspection, she had moved, but her breathing was still even and deep. Hopper whispered her name, then

said it at a normal volume, then nearly yelled it. Eleven rolled over and sighed, but didn't wake. *Huh*, Jim thought. *That's why it's so damn hard to wake her from the dreams.* And it was; not only did Hopper struggle especially when rousing her from a nightmare, but getting her up for breakfast was sometimes a twenty minute ordeal that occasionally involved the bribe of an Eggo.

Despite the increasing level of comfortability she was feeling around Jim, Eleven was still pretty silent, in nearly every aspect of the world. Not only did she refrain from speaking unless necessary to communicate, but even her actions were quiet. She snuck up on Hopper often, always accidentally, and he swore Eleven walked on air. She hardly laughed, her sense of humor being as underdeveloped as the rest of her, and most of Hopper's attempts at jokes were beyond her realm of comprehension. The things she did find funny were sometimes odd; the first time Jim heard her laugh was when a fly got stuck inside the house. He saw Eleven watching it's futile attempt to escape out the closed door, and thought he was hearing things until he came closer and saw her shoulders shaking with giggles. Another time he caught her jumping on her bed, landing once on her knees and then again on her feet, laughing hard but, as always, very quietly.

The child lacked social boundaries almost entirely. Hopper shaved one day, and upon emerging from the bathroom missing a beard, Eleven came forward and touched his face without warning because, of course, she needed to see what it felt like, (she even went as far as smelling his face too, he'd put on aftershave). Personal space was a foreign subject to her. Eleven watched everything Hopper did with round, curious eyes and at a very close proximity, often using her other senses for closer observation. She had no concept of modesty, often roaming the cabin shirt or pantsless if it was warm enough inside. Jim took diligent care to maintain his own privacy, even though once Eleven came into the bathroom to pee while he was in the shower because she 'couldn't hold it'-damn it if she wasn't a three year old. He knew he needed to talk to the kid about what was appropriate and what wasn't, but he didn't know how to and wasn't sure if she'd even understand. For now, it was just the two of them, and Hopper didn't worry much. Aside from the nightmares that plagued her a few nights a week, Eleven seemed to be getting both

happier and healthier. Jim didn't want to risk making her feel anything short of that, so he did his best to make everything seem *good*.

Some nights, however, were worse than others.

4. Chapter 4

It had been a rough day for the child. There was a loud and windy snowstorm the night before, and Jim had to leave for work before Eleven even woke up, though to his credit he left her a note in explanation. Midway through the day, the power in the cabin went out, so the girl couldn't watch TV or listen to records. She tried to read, but Hopper made it very clear that under no circumstances should she open the curtains, and without electricity or natural light she was forced to read in the dark, an activity that didn't last long. The child jumped on the bed for a while, but tired of it quickly due to the lack of sleep she'd gotten the night before. She ate all the Eggos, the only thing she could eat without cooking, though she'd come to prefer them toasted-in the *toaster*. Hopper was late returning home, and he didn't signal, which left the girl incredibly worried. Was he ever coming back? Did the Bad Men catch him, or did he not like her anymore, was that why he hadn't returned? As the sun set and the house began to darken, Eleven grew more and more nervous. Her mind inadvertently went back to the last time she was left alone in the dark-to the *many* times she'd been left alone in the dark-and found herself sitting by the door, biting off each of her nails while she waited. By the time Hopper finally returned over two hours late, Eleven was bored, anxious, and more than hungry. She opened the door before he even knocked and threw herself into his arms, the first hug she'd ever given him that wasn't warranted by a bad dream.

"I'm sorry Kid, the roads were really bad." Jim said, surprised but pleased by the unexpected affection.

"No signal." Eleven replied when she pulled away, more relieved he was there than angry over his tardiness.

"Shit, I'm sorry, you're right." Hopper sighed. He *did* forget to tell her he was running late. No wonder she was so worked up. It was then that he noticed how dark the cabin was. "Why're all the lights off?"

"No power."

"Oh, shit. You're probably starving." He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Okay, I'll go get us some take out."

"Take out?" Eleven asked. She didn't know what 'shit' meant either, but he said it a lot, and the girl assumed that the former was related to food, which was a more pressing matter.

"Food that gets made by someone else, and I drive to pick it up and bring it back."

"Leave?"

"Yeah, I have to leave. But I'll be right back, and I'll have food."

"No."

The man sighed again and bent down on one knee so he was level with the girl. "Kid, if I don't get food we're both gonna starve."

"I go."

"No, you should stay. You know why."

Eleven felt a quiver in her lower lip, but bit it back and simply nodded, swallowing the growing lump in her throat. Hopper didn't notice the girl fighting tears, she made sure of that. She'd waited so long for him to return and now he was leaving *again*. She understood that he *had* to go and why she couldn't come, but still wished she could. Eleven didn't want Hopper to see how upset she was; he was leaving no matter what, so what was the use in stalling him with tears when it would only further delay his return? Hopper put his hat back on, and Eleven couldn't help the slumping of her shoulders.

"Sit tight, I'll be back as soon as I can." Then the door closed and she was alone.

Again.

The child resumed her seated position underneath the locks and tucked her knees to her chest. The house was only getting darker by the second, and as Eleven's heart rate increased, she began to silently rock back and forth until she heard Hopper's returning footsteps. Eleven unlocked the door and opened it, then promptly sat at the table in hungry anticipation.

"Hope you like Chinese food." Jim said when the girl began digging through the bag. He expected Eleven to ask him what Chinese was, but she was too busy stuffing dumplings down her throat at such an alarming rate that she didn't even realize he'd said something she didn't understand. While she ate, Hopper dug through the kitchen for a flashlight he knew would be stashed there. When found, Jim turned every ounce of his attention into getting the power back on, unintentionally leaving the girl on the backburner.

Eleven was crushed. Why didn't he want to eat with her? Did he not like her anymore, did she bother him somehow? A tear streamed down her cheek, and this time she hoped Hopper would notice so he would know she was upset. He didn't though, he was too engrossed in his task. When she finished eating, Eleven skipped a bath and instead sat on the couch to watch in hopes Jim would acknowledge her, but she had no such luck. It was past the time she normally went to bed when Hopper got the power back on. Everything in the cabin sprung to life suddenly, and the man pumped a fist in success. Eleven was excited to see which movie they were going to watch, but Hopper disappointed her again.

"Sorry that took so long, Kid. Let's go read."

Eleven had to make a conscious effort to not drop her jaw. "Movie?"

"It's already late and I'm dead tired. We can watch one tomorrow."

She nodded regretfully. Jim read her two chapters before he stopped for his own sake. It took a long time for the child to fall asleep that night. It had been an immensely disappointing day, and Eleven couldn't shake the feeling that she'd done something to make Hopper act that way.

Jim fell asleep shortly after Eleven did, and she woke him from slumber with a strangled scream. This time his bed was about a foot off the ground, and Jim fell hard when he was hurrying to get to the girl. Cursing under his breath, he entered the bedroom, where everything but the bed was levitating as well. Eleven was still asleep, frantically thrashing back and forth and clutching the covers close to her chest. Every few seconds she'd let out a scream, blood would fall from her nose, and the house would shake. Thank God they didn't

have any neighbors.

"Eleven, wake up, Kid. You're dreaming." Hopper said, reaching out to her. Physical contact always seemed to rouse her faster. But the child was still stuck, and her cries were becoming increasingly frantic. It wasn't until Jim sat beside her and pulled her head into his lap that she woke up, and when she did she was still screaming. "You're okay, I'm right here."

She sat up and hugged him as tight as she could. The dream had been terrifying, and Hopper was finally here for her, *just* her, so she held on with all her might. As her cries began to cease, Jim noticed a peculiar smell and pulled away, looking quizzically down at the girl. Eleven smelled it too, and began to feel her legs growing cold. The color drained from her face as she realized what she'd done. Hopper knew the second she paled, and confirmed his suspicions when he slowly lifted the blankets to reveal Eleven's soaked pajamas and sheets underneath.

"Shit, Kid." Jim said empathetically, slightly shocked at the sheer amount of urine the little girl had managed to produce. Hadn't she gone before she went to sleep? He'd have to make certain she did next time, maybe limit how much she could drink after dinner like they did with Sara during her treatment.

Unfortunately, Eleven mistook his sympathy for disappointment and promptly burst into tears again. She was expecting the worst. He would either make her leave and never let her return, or lock her away somewhere dark and cramped like Papa used to. Eleven remembered with horror the last time she'd wet the bed, when she tried to hide the evidence so she wouldn't get in trouble. That plan wound up backfiring when Brenner found her hidden sheets anyway and sent her to the small room for even longer than normal. Just thinking about it made the child cry even harder. She wished Hopper was angry instead, anything would be less painful than his silent disappointment. But then he reached out to hug her, and even more shocking was when he wasn't disgusted with her mess, even lifted her out of bed and held her in his arms as he stood. Eleven thought maybe he really *was* going to lock her somewhere, but instead he rubbed circles into her back and swayed on his feet, slowly carrying the child to the dresser where he plucked fresh pajamas out of a

drawer and headed towards the bathroom.

"I'm gonna start you a bath to clean up, okay?" Hopper said softly when he set her to stand, turning the tap on. The tub began filling quickly as the little girl shakily peeled her clothes off and stepped in, avoiding eye contact with the man she was still sure was angry. Once she seemed settled, he spoke again. "Alright, I'll go change the sheets."

Eleven barely registered that she was nodding into her knees. He would clean the bed for her? Why? She choked on another sob as Hopper bent down beside the bathtub. "Hey, it's okay, El. I'm not upset."

The child's eyes widened as she finally looked at him. She hadn't been called El for so long that she'd forgotten what it sounded like, how it made her feel. "Not upset?"

"Not at all, Kid. It's not a big deal, accidents happen."

Eleven wiped her tears and sniffled, and Jim gave her growing mop of curls a good natured ruffle before stepping out. Sitting in the filling tub, the girl was assaulted with images from her nightmare, one where she'd been taken from the cabin by the Bad Men. She was crying out, screaming and begging for Hopper to help her, but he was nowhere to be found, late coming home and not responding to her signals. The last thing she wanted now was to be away from him, so she washed off as fast as she could and ended the bath early, returning to her bedroom to find the bed completely stripped, her soiled sheets in a crumpled pile on the floor. There was a dark stain on the mattress that Jim covered with a towel, and Eleven couldn't help but feel ashamed even in spite of his reassurances-*I'm not mad, I promise*. Nevertheless, she crawled into bed when it was made again and layed down against the man, burrowing into his chest. But sleep did not come for the terrified little girl, and by the time the sun rose, she still had her eyes open.

Eleven was unable to sleep for a multitude of reasons: she was worried the man would leave early for work again without telling her, despite his understanding she was still very embarrassed about wetting the bed, and she did *not* want to experience another

nightmare. The child's most recent dream had highlighted an unconscious and nagging fear: that she could be found again at any moment, and that Hopper wouldn't help her. Eleven didn't know why she felt this way, because the man had only been more than caring and warm towards her. The real problem was the child's traumatic past. Her 'papa' had only ever shown the girl attention and love when she did something for him, and this caused her to believe that she could only gain positive interaction through doing something impressive. Eleven had a difficult time understanding that Hopper liked her for *her*, and his distracted demeanor the night before had triggered an underlying fear that she was not good enough and that Jim was going to leave her behind.

The girl went through a multitude of phases, ones that many children go through, but usually before they began school. Hopper remembered his own daughter passing the same chapters, but while hers went on indefinitely, Eleven's stages were short and sweet; Jim found that they usually lasted less than a week, and as soon as one was out another took its place. The first one he took note of was the girl's desire to constantly change her clothes. She switched outfits at least four to five times a day. Hopper thought it was cute, and he never discouraged the behavior because, after all, Eleven *did* learn how to use a zipper and tie her shoes. She'd never had her own clothes before either, let alone so many, and she had no place to wear them besides around the cabin. Jim knew this, so he didn't object, and soon enough Eleven was happy with one set of clothing a day.

She began copying him as well, Jim caught her mimicking his actions after dinner one night, repeating his loud sighs and facial scratches. He smiled to himself, remembering Sara doing the same thing. Just as the thought of his daughter began to fill him with sorrow, Eleven frowned deeply, pulling her eyebrows as close as she could together, and he realized she was still copying him. Pushing his sadness aside, Hopper looked straight at the child and stuck a finger up his nose, seeing if she'd still mimic him. Instead, he received a look of disgust and a quiet, "Ew," that made him bellow in laughter. At least he didn't have to worry about teaching her not to dig for gold.

Next was the 'why' phase, one Jim actually saw coming. She had so many questions already-*What's this? What's that? What happened?*-and

he always answered her if he could because, hell, how else would she learn what common household objects were? But even an explanation needed an explanation, and sometimes even another. A few times Hopper gave up and simply said he didn't know, but this often backfired because she always had a second question in reserve. One night, Hopper was watching TV and Eleven emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel, her brow furrowed. The child stood directly in front of the television, effectively blocking Jim's view and guaranteeing his attention.

"What's up, Kid?"

"I can't breathe in water." she stated simply, pausing slightly between words. Eleven usually began her queries as a statement, first checking to see if her observations were correct.

Jim nodded, putting together an answer. It was hard, sometimes Eleven didn't know how to phrase her question and Hopper didn't know how to answer it, let alone in a way she would understand. "Yeah, humans don't breathe underwater."

"Why?"

Hopper sighed, thinking through an explanation she wouldn't have more questions than answers about. "Well, because we need oxygen to breathe. Just like how fish can only breathe water, humans can only breathe oxygen. A fish would die without being underwater, and we would die if we didn't have air."

"Oxygen?"

"The stuff we breathe. Oxygen is around us all the time." Hopper took a deep breath and blew it out loudly, motioning to the air. He'd expected another question, but his answer must have satisfied the girl because she retreated to her room to find pajamas.

The pointing phase accompanied the why's, and was one that particularly annoyed Hopper. Half the time he had no idea what the hell she was pointing at, but the reason she was pointing at an object was because she didn't know what it was called or what it did or couldn't describe it, so how else could she refer to it? To her credit,

Eleven sometimes added a "what's that?" to her gesture, but it still didn't clarify exactly *what* she was pointing too. It frustrated her too, because she didn't have the words to ask him verbally and had to rely almost solely on her actions. This ultimately led often to miscommunications, such as when Eleven pointed to the toaster and Hopper thought she was pointing at the microwave. It wasn't until weeks later that the issue was resolved after the girl really got to wondering why the machine called the toaster wasn't even used for toast and asked Jim again, finally getting the right answer.

As the weeks seemed to fly by, Eleven continued to crawl further out of her shell. She jumped less and less at surprise noises, she spoke more often, and her nightmares began to decrease. Unlike the traumatized child hiding in the woods, overly weary of any human contact, El now sought it out. When they watched television together, the child always curled into Hopper's side and pressed her cheek to his chest, practically sitting in his lap. Sometimes she'd start to fall asleep, not even fully waking when Jim carried her to the bathroom, then to bed. If she woke in the middle of the night with screams tearing from her throat, the man always came to wrap her tightly in his arms, the only way he could get her back down after a nightmare. Physical affection was still new to the little girl, so she soaked up every second of it she got; El was absolutely at peace when Hopper was holding her.

She learned a lot about him, too. Hopper made strange noises with his nose and mouth while he slept, but she didn't mind them. Eleven did wonder, though, why he drank disgusting smelling liquid from a can and why he blew horrendous smoke from his mouth, tainting everything around him. She didn't understand why Hopper liked things that smelled and probably tasted terrible, but didn't really care as long as he never made her try it. Whenever Hopper got frustrated, whether he was burning their dinner or getting a paper cut while reading to her, he often used words that he would later tell her *not* to repeat. She didn't understand what the words meant, just that Hopper said that kids shouldn't say them. Everything he did was so *loud*, from his walking to his speaking, and Eleven had a hard time getting used to the sheer size of him. Hopper was significantly taller and stronger than anyone she'd ever known, and at first that frightened her, but she soon grew to appreciate how comforting his large frame could be.

She could protect herself just fine; she could protect *many* people just fine, but it was nice to know that she didn't always have to, that there was someone willing to protect her, too. Jim continuously had to remind himself that she'd grown up without any knowledge of the world around her. He wondered if she even knew that there was life outside the lab before she escaped it. Hopper tried to ask more about her background, but Eleven either simply didn't have the words to tell him or didn't want to. He'd concluded that the 'Papa' from her nightmares was that bastard Brenner, and it haunted him every time he thought about the girl's past.

5. Chapter 5

Three weeks in, Hopper found a cache of stale Eggos hidden in El's sock drawer putting away her clothes one night while she was taking a bath. For a moment he was angry-*that's* how she'd been going through them so fast-but quickly righted himself. Hiding food meant that she was feeling insecure about something, and he had to address the carefully problem if he wanted it to stop. Jim called her to the table after she'd put on her pajamas, and she froze in the doorway at the sight of her outed stash.

"Sit down, Kid, let's talk about something." he said. Eleven assumed the worst. Her hands shook when she climbed stiffly into the opposing chair, and she wouldn't meet his gaze. Hopper saw tears forming in her eyes and knew that he'd gone about this wrong already.

"I'm not mad at you. Hey, look at me, Kid." He spotted her eyes for a split second, noting wet trails down both cheeks. "You're not in trouble, I just wanna talk. Why're you hiding food?"

The child stared at the floor in silence. She didn't have an answer for him. There was no reason for her to hide food, and she knew that. There was always enough in the cabin and Hopper never made her skip meals, but she still couldn't seem to shake the worry that someday it would run out. She never took things he ate, only Eggos, just to make sure she always had backup. She never ate one, instead kept them stowed away safely-or at least she thought. She'd have to find a better hiding place.

"El?" Hopper prompted. "Talk to me, Kiddo. I'm not upset, I promise." She sniffled and shrugged. The man sighed. How was he supposed to get anywhere with her if she wouldn't even speak to him? "Please, Kid."

"I don't know." she mumbled, her barely audible voice breaking.

"Do you get hungry at night or something? Cause if you need a snack before bed.."

She shook her head. "No."

Jim sighed again. "There will always be food for you here, Kid. If you get hungry you just have to tell me, okay?" El nodded, scrubbing at her tears with her shirtsleeve. He tried a small smile, reaching forward to squeeze her shoulder reassuringly. "Okay. Now, do you want to watch TV for a while or read an extra chapter?"

She was quiet and withdrawn for the rest of the evening. Instead of waking Hopper with her screams in the middle of the night, she forced her cries deep into a pillow, silencing them. She was clearly anxious around him for the next few days, and the man tried his best to calm her ever-present nerves by offering snacks more frequently and serving the girl larger portions at meals. Despite worrying that the man would be angry if he found out she was hoarding again, the nagging fear of going hungry drove El to scour her bedroom for a spot he wouldn't discover. It had been *stupid* to hide them in her dresser, she knew he put away her clothes sometimes. But she doubted he would check the space between the rack of blankets and the wall, so each day after Hopper left for work, El toasted an Eggo and slid it between the crack. She never actually broke into her supply, she just needed the sense of comfort that came from knowing that there would always be *something* for her to eat no matter what. If the Bad Men found her and she had to run, she had food to take with her. If Hopper never came back and she finished everything in the fridge, at least she'd have a few Eggos remaining. Deep down El knew that her logic was flawed, but couldn't shake the learned survival skill nonetheless.

It took another few weeks before Jim discovered that she was still hiding food in her room. One particularly cold night, Hopper woke not to El's nightmare, but to his own shivering body. The fire was out, and after getting it going again, he went to the child's room to give her an extra blanket and grab a second one for himself. The shelf swayed forward when he pulled them off, and he heard something behind it fall. She didn't wake up when he turned on her lamp-he knew she wouldn't-and cursed under his breath when he saw the pile of moldy waffles that had fallen to the floor. The man sighed heavily and resigned to cleaning up the rotten food, tucking a blanket over Eleven when he was finished. He brushed a stray loop of hair behind

her ear and stared at her for a moment, body in a tight ball and hands curled up to her cheeks. It seemed strange to see her this way, so little and peaceful, especially compared to the other ways he'd seen her in this bed before, writhing and screaming in terror, flailing her arms and legs. He switched off her lamp and went back to his own bed, but didn't sleep for the rest of the night.

When El woke up the next morning, the first thing she noticed was the weight of an extra blanket. Her stomach dropped when she noticed that the rack that held the blankets had been pulled away from the wall, and upon inspection, there were no Eggos behind it. The child's breath caught in her throat as she glanced at the open doorway. She could picture her pile of stowed away food sitting on the kitchen table, Hopper standing over it in anger. Despite the fact that the girl could smell the man cooking breakfast and that her stomach pinched in hunger, El got back in bed and huddled under the covers, crying silently into her pillow. She heard Hopper step into the bedroom a few times to check on her, and she tried her best to pretend to be asleep for as long as he let her. Twenty minutes before he had to leave for work, their breakfast was starting to get cold and Jim resolved to finally wake the girl. El curled further into her blankets when she heard his footsteps coming closer, and bit back a sob as he sat on the edge of her bed.

"Time to wake up, Kid, breakfast is ready and I've gotta leave for work soon." he said, but when he reached out to gently pet her hair, he felt her shaking. Jim sighed, easily guessing what she was upset over. "El, I'm not mad about the Eggos, okay? I was gonna talk to you about it when I had more time tonight, but it's okay, alright? You're not in trouble and I'm not angry."

The child sniffled and wiped her eyes with her pajama sleeve, but kept her back to the man. It took him awhile to coax her out of bed, and she picked at her breakfast in anxious silence. Hopper was hesitant to depart that morning, worried to leave her in such a distraught condition. He remained distracted all day, trying tirelessly to find a solution. What was the real issue at stake here? The problem wasn't that El was hiding food in her room, but that it was *rotting* in there. If only she had her own refrigerator. At the thought, Hopper put out his cigarette and left the station before it got dark.

When Hopper knocked a few hours before he was expected to be home, Eleven was gripped with sudden dread. Had he decided now that he was mad at her? She opened the door with her mind but remained on the couch facing the television, too afraid to look at him. She heard him set something down before he took off his coat and belt, and tentatively peered over her shoulder when he disappeared into the bathroom. El's breath caught in her throat when she saw the old wooden box from the woods on the kitchen table. Why had he brought it here? What would he do, limit her food intake to what he'd been giving her in the woods. Tears welled in her wide eyes, but she sat frozen on the couch in fearful anticipation for the man to return.

Jim's heart sank when he came out of the bathroom to find the child crying again. What had happened this time? He'd hardly said two words to her! But when he saw her glance at the box on the table, he began to develop an inkling as to why she might be so upset. He moved to sit next to her on the couch, and she sat stiff as a stone next to him, hands clasped in her lap and eyes looking anywhere but at him.

"Hey, you don't need to cry, it's okay, Kid." He said, slowly reaching out and touching her shoulder. She didn't move. "I thought that maybe if you want to keep Eggos in your room, you could keep 'em in this box so that they don't get moldy so fast. And if they do, you can throw the old ones away and make new ones. How does that sound?"

Finally she looked at him, her expression full of confusion and surprise. Not only was Hopper not mad at her, but he was telling her it was okay to keep food in her room, was even giving her a place to put it! "Not mad?"

"Not at all. If having extra food in your room makes you feel better you can do it, I just don't want it to go bad, 'cause then we'll get mice and stuff. You can keep whatever food you want in the box, okay? Sound good?"

"Yes." she said, a small smile tickling her lips. Hopper ruffled her hair, bringing on a full grin, and went to the kitchen to start dinner.

El lugged the wooden box into her room and pushed it out of sight under her bed. She went back to her routine of stashing an Eggo away every morning, but made a point to throw them away at the end of every two weeks before they ever got moldy. Hopper noticed a change in the child after giving her approval and a secure place to store her snacks. She was less anxious when he was in her bedroom. He hadn't noticed the behavior until was no longer present, but before he gave her the box, El always followed the man into the bedroom when he went in there, She kept her eyes on him at all times, and before he'd assumed it was because she was still wary of him, but he was beginning to conclude that he'd been under her watchful gaze because she was hiding something from him, and he filed that fact into the back of his mind for possible future reference.

The first three months of the year came and went quickly, or at least it felt that way to Hopper; the days sort of blurred together when he only got an average of four hours of sleep a night. The winter had been one for the books, with record lows dipping well below freezing nearly every night. The man was relieved beyond belief that he found Eleven when he did, especially when, in mid March, a massive snow storm coated their tiny town in almost three feet of powder in less than two days. They'd had time to prepare though, the storm had been tearing through the whole of Indiana over the last few weeks, and Hopper kept a close eye on the weather watch. The night before the near blizzard, television newscasters were warning civilians to prepare for possible power outages, icy roads, and school closures. The weather woman was estimating the snowfall for the night when the channel suddenly switched once, twice, landing finally on a Looney Tunes episode they'd both seen before.

"Don't wanna hear about the weather?" Jim asked with a chuckle.

"*I hate snow.*" Eleven nearly spit, eyes still glued to the screen. She'd added 'hate' to her vocabulary the week before, and it quickly became a favorite.

I hate this show, when her favorite soap played a rerun instead of a new episode.

I hate peas, when Hopper slid the vegetables onto her dinner plate.

I hate that, when she spilled chocolate milk on her shirt right after getting dressed.

"You hate *snow*?" Jim asked incredulously. He didn't know any kids that hated snow. Hell, he knew for a fact that all the kids in town were psyched for the upcoming storm that would surely cancel school.

"It's cold," she replied simply, still not looking at him. She usually didn't, eye contact for El was rare and greatly appreciated by Hopper when it occurred.

"Well yeah, but it's fun, too. You can build a snowman, have a snowball fight, go sledding.."

"Snowball?" the girl interrupted, eyes wide and now aimed at him.

"Yeah, it's a ball made out of snow that you throw at someone for fun, it's like a game."

Confusion and disbelief crossed her face, and she shook her head. "No."

Confusion crossed Jim's, too. "Um, yeah, that *is* what a snowball is."

"Snowball is a dance." El said matter of factly.

A dance? What the hell is she talking about? Suddenly Hopper remembered. "Oh, you mean that thing at school that Will went to?"

She nodded, a pang of melancholy stabbing her in the chest. She was happy for Will, that he'd been well enough to go, but deeply sad that Mike had been unable to keep the promise he made her due to circumstances out of his control. She knew Mike didn't go, instead he'd talked to her on the radio for over an hour in tears.

"That's another double meaning word, kind of like how you can turn right, the direction, and be right *about* something. A snowball can be both a ball of snow, or it can be a school dance, yeah?"

"Yes." Eleven nodded in understanding, soaking in the new information. She was never annoyed with his thorough explanations,

if anything she asked for them when a sufficient enough one wasn't supplied. The child reminded Hopper of a sponge that way, never turning down the chance to learn anything and immediately retaining the information given to her. She had a strong desire for furthering her knowledge, and El had a great memory.

"But I get why you don't like snow, you were out there in it for a while." Hopper said, understanding her distaste.

She didn't say anything, just turned up the volume on the TV without moving to indicate she was done with the conversation. That night after she'd gone to bed and the snow had begun to fall in huge flakes, Hopper dug through the storage loft and managed to retrieve the long, wooden sled he'd used as a child. The paint was a little chipped, but it would work. Smiling as he set it against the door, Jim fell asleep filled with anticipation for the next day.

When Hopper woke the girl the next morning, she was surprised to see him wearing what appeared to be multiple layers of clothes. The house didn't feel any colder than it usually did, so El was confused by his outfit choice. Even more confusing was when he began to pick clothes out *for* her; he never did that, not even after Eleven once dressed herself in both polka dots and stripes, emerging from her room looking like a half-assed circus clown. Jim always just let her experiment, knowing nobody was going to see her anyway. Besides, it put a smile on his face every time he pictured her.

"Why?" the child asked, still in bed under the covers but sitting up against the frame. She was pointing to him, to her dresser, eyeing his clothes, and Jim understood what she was getting at.

"Just trust me, I have a surprise for you." The man said with a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Surprise?"

"Something fun that you don't expect. I *surprise* you when I come home with Eggos that you didn't know I was bringing, yeah?"

"Yes."

"Okay, so today I have a surprise for you."

"Eggos?" She asked, eyes wide and smile tracing her lips.

Jim resisted the urge to pinch his nose. "No, Kid, theres...we already have plenty of Eggos, that's not the surprise."

"...then, what?"

"That's kinda the point, you won't know what it is until it happens." he explained.

"When?"

"When what?" Hopper asked, trying his best not to feel annoyed at the child's constant staccato sentences.

"The surprise."

"After breakfast I'll show you, okay?" Jim said, passing the child a giant pile of clothes. "Put these on and we'll eat."

Her eyes widened at the amount he handed her. "All of them?"

"You'll understand soon, I promise."

Eleven's eyes sparkled with anticipation and she immediately clambered out of bed and to the bathroom. She never shut the door, so as Jim was throwing bread in the toaster, he caught sight of the child squeezing toothpaste onto her toothbrush-hands free, of course-while simultaneously pulling another pair of pants on, wiping her nose when she finished. Hopper just smiled and set the table, still getting used to seeing her casual show of telekinesis. The girl tore through her breakfast per usual, and finally noticed the sled beside the door when she stood to put her plate in the sink.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing to the sled.

"That's part of the surprise. Ready?" Jim asked as he deposited his dishes as well.

The girl nodded enthusiastically, smile spreading to her eyes. She was

excited; El had never experienced enjoyable anticipation before, and the feeling was new and unexpected. Hopper grabbed the sled and opened the door, revealing the path he'd shoveled out front before he woke her up. Eleven stared at the snow blankly, then looked up at Hopper, acutely unimpressed. This was the surprise? A trail?

"I'm gonna show you how fun snow can be!" Jim said with a smile.

The child was not smiling. She was disappointed, actually. Hopper said surprises were fun, and she distinctly remembered mentioning just yesterday that she didn't like snow.

"Kid, snow is great, I promise." The man said. He could tell this wasn't what she'd anticipated, but was determined to win her favor. "I know you had a hard time in it, but if you ever get too cold or uncomfortable or something, we'll just go back inside and you can warm up, alright?" He gripped her shoulder and attempted to look her in the eyes but didn't succeed. "You're not stuck out there anymore, okay, Kid? The cabin is always here, and me, too."

Eleven narrowed her eyes. "Work?"

Hopper smiled. "I took the day off." He could imagine Flo laughing at him if she knew the truth behind his requested 'personal day'. *Jim Hopper, you never did grow up, did you?*

Despite being disappointed in the surprise, El was more than excited to have Hopper home all day long, and especially just to be with her. Maybe the snow wouldn't be so bad.

"What do you want to do first?" The man asked, seeing that her attitude had shifted. She looked around and shrugged, unsure of what there *was* to do. The only thing she'd ever done in the snow was sit and suffer in it, and even though she recognized its beauty-falling snow at night especially captivated her-the girl didn't enjoy being *in* it. But if Hopper said she could go inside if she got too cold, then she supposed she could give it a shot. Besides, this was something new to do, and it was definitely better than sitting in the cabin all day long. She glanced down at the part-of-the-surprise Hopper was holding, and pointed to it. The man smiled. "Yeah, sure. There's a hill around here somewhere."

"Hill?"

"You'll see, Kid. Come on." He happened to glance down before stepping forward, spotting El's white sneakers that nearly matched the snow. Jim looked at his own waterproof boots and frowned. Five steps in and her feet would be soaked. Noting the sled in his hands, Hopper brightened with an idea and quickly handed it over to the girl, which was about as big as she was. Stepping onto the porch and retrieving a spare line of rope he kept lying on the deck, he retrieved the sled and began fastening it to the front. Eleven watched him with rapt attention, putting together what Hopper's thought process had been by reading his expressions. When he was finished, Jim set the sled down on the path and wrapped the rope twice around the inside of his hand. "Climb on, Kid, I'll pull you."

Timidly, El sat on her knees and gripped the wooden sides tightly, glancing up at Hopper to signal she was ready. He began, and the girl quickly realized that she didn't need to hold on at all. She readjusted her seating position and tucked her hands inside her sleeves, gazing out at the still falling snow. Hawkins had almost a foot so far, and the storm was projected to continue for another day at least. *Not so bad*, the child thought. It was cold out, yes, but she was wearing so many layers that it wasn't even so noticeable, not nearly as cold as she had been while living in the woods. And Hopper was with her, he was even pulling her behind him, in...

"Hopper?"

"Yeah?"

"What is this?"

Jim glanced behind him, confused. "What?" In answer, the child tapped the wood beneath her twice. "Oh, it's called a sled. You'll see what it's for when we get to the hill."

There were so many things Hopper wasn't telling her today. Eleven felt a mix between eager curiosity and annoyance at the man's incessant renditions of 'you'll see', but the excitement of finding out what was next was, in a way, exhilarating. They were approaching a clearing, and El could see that just beyond it, the snow seemed to be

taller. As the duo reached the small field, Hopper stopped and pointed. "That's the hill. We walk the sled up, then sit on it and go down. It's fun."

The child was slightly hesitant-she wore the same expression when Jim put unfamiliar food on her plate-but nodded along when she saw how excited *he* looked. She knew Hopper was an adult, but right now he looked like a kid, like how one of her friends might look. The man began pulling her again, now uphill, and El *did* have to hold on. Hopper was huffing and puffing by the time they reached the top, so the girl stood up and offered him a seat. He chuckled and sat down, but grabbed Eleven by the waist and pulled her to sit in his lap before she could step too far away. She was shocked when the man yanked her into him, but he was laughing and acting so *silly* that she could help but turn to look up at him and smile.

"We're gonna go down together, yeah?" Hopper said. The girl sat up straight and glanced down the hill, which now appeared far higher than it had from below. She glanced back at the man worriedly, and he squeezed her reassuringly.

"Don't worry, Kid, I've got you." he said, wrapping one arm tightly around her and pulling their bodies close together. El could feel his heartbeat echoing her own and took a deep breath, nodding. "Ready?"

The girl gripped his arm with both of hers and tucked her fingers in her sleeves. "Ready."

Jim pushed them forward with one foot and they were off, flying fast through the snow, specks of it spraying out around them. Eleven's eyes were wide, but she wasn't afraid. The man behind her was laughing with joy as they sped down the hill, and when they reached the bottom the child was giggling, too. She turned and gazed up at Hopper with wonder, cheeks and nose bright pink and smiling so widely that her teeth showed. "Again!"

They did-again, and again, and again. El couldn't get enough, she wanted to go faster each time, hurried Hopper back towards the top as soon as they reached the bottom. They tried different positions in attempt to attain ultimate speed, him in front and her in the back, an

act that caused the sled to flip completely around, both of them screaming as they plummeted down the hill backwards. The next time they reached the top, however, El pushed Jim away when he sat down with her.

"What?" Hopper asked.

"Get off."

He scoffed, amused. "You wanna go alone?"

"Yes." she said, and he was shocked when the girl didn't hesitate even for a second, pushing herself forward with her feet as he'd done previously. At the bottom, she smiled up at Hopper before her eyes fell to the sled. She hadn't even thought about having to get back up, the man always just pulled her. Grabbing the rope, El began trudging up the hill in the same manner, dragging the sled behind her. Midway up the hill she was more than out of breath, and it felt as if she was pulling a bag of rocks behind her. Smirking at an idea, the girl lifted the heavy sled in the air with her mind, shuffling faster through the snow now that she wasn't as weighed down.

Hopper almost yelled at the child to drop the damn thing, but after glancing around, he realized that there was nothing to worry about, there was nobody that might see them. Besides, it was pretty cool to see an ordinary looking little girl using actual superpowers. She was tired when she dropped the sled at his feet, wiping her nose with her sleeve and frowning down at her shoes.

"You'ok, kid?" he asked, concerned.

"My feet are cold." she said, and he noticed the child beginning to shiver. She hadn't had to really walk in the snow much, so her clothes had stayed relatively dry until having to hike up the hill.

"Wanna go home?" Hopper suggested. El gazed around them and seemed hesitant to leave-she was having so much fun. "We can come back out after you warm up, how's that sound?"

That earned him a smile and a nod. Back at the cabin, Hopper placed the child's shoes by the fire as she peeled off the layers that were

damp from snow, setting them next to her shoes. The man wrapped a blanket around the girl and brought her dry socks when she sat on the couch, flicking on the TV.

They went back out again after lunch, and Jim showed the girl how to build a snowman. He encouraged her not to use her powers when she attempted to impress him with them, instead helping her roll the giant snowballs manually. During this, Hopper realized quickly that Eleven was physically-very weak. He remembered her difficulty earlier in the day with the sled, and watched with slight pity as she tried to lift the middle piece of their snowman and barely got it to budge. He wound up doing most of the work, but they were both breathless by the time Hopper took the hat off his head and placed it atop their massive finished snowman, complete with a scarf, stick nose, and a rock mouth and eyes. By then, El's shoes were soaked again, but now she refused to go inside. Jim didn't want her feet to freeze and he didn't want her only pair of shoes to be ruined, so he did the only thing he could think of-improvised. Switching into a pair of his old sneakers that he *didn't* mind ruining, Hopper stuffed the toes full of newspaper until El's feet somewhat fit inside. She looked like a clown, but was warm and full of giggles, so Hopper was happy, too. At one point when her back was turned, Jim pelted her lightly with a snowball. The girl whipped around immediately, face stricken as if he'd threatened her.

"Take it easy, it's just a snowball fight."

The child shook her head. "No."

"No what?"

"No fighting."

Hopper fought back a laugh but let on a smile. "Not an angry fight, a fun one, like a game. Who can hit who with the most snowballs, but don't throw very hard and not at the face, like this." he balled one in his hand and heaved it gently, landing at her feet. "You try."

Eleven took a scoop of snow, attempted to pat it down with the oversized gloves Hopper had given her, and made a weak throw at the man that fell short. When her second shot missed its mark, she

threw the third with her mind, pelting Hopper in the chest.

"Hey no powers, that's cheating." he said with a laugh, brushing the snow from his front.

"Cheating?"

"Breaking the rules to a game. I can't throw things with my mind, so it wouldn't be fair if you could and I couldn't." he tried to explain.

"But...you're not fair." El tried, not sure how to explain herself.

"Me? How?"

"You're bigger."

This time, Hopper couldn't fight off the belt of laughter. Instead he ruffled the child's hair under her hat with a smile. "I guess you're right."

6. Chapter 6

Hopper was excited to see how much Eleven grew to enjoy being outside in the snow. He was happy that she didn't seem to associate it with her time spent alone in the woods anymore, and loved when he had the time to play with her in it. During the span of the snowstorm, Jim and Eleven built an entire snowman village, an igloo tall enough for her to stand in, and everyday they went for a walk, the man always pulling the girl behind him in the sled. Eleven cherished the moments she had outside with Hopper, so much that she attempted to spend nearly all of their time together doing so. Unfortunately, the pair was forced to settle down a week in when the child fell ill for the first time in her life.

The sickness hit her suddenly one morning after Jim left for work and progressed throughout the day, beginning with an overall feeling of tiredness that El wasn't accustomed to. She hadn't done anything physically exhausting, hadn't overused her powers, and she'd slept well the night before. When Hopper arrived home in the evening, the girl was lying on the couch wrapped in a blanket and absently watching TV, eyes glazed and showing no intention of wanting to go outside. In the back of his head it struck him as odd, but Hopper simply figured she'd gotten bored with playing in the snow. Jim didn't mind, he'd had a long day at work and was forced to skip lunch, leaving him hungry for dinner. He made it earlier than usual, and while the man engulfed his meal, Eleven picked at hers slowly, trying hard to eat as much as she could. In the lab, if the girl didn't finish what was given to her, she wasn't fed the next day. But as hard as she tried, El felt that her stomach had shrunk in size, and her appetite was nonexistent.

It wasn't like Hopper didn't notice; it was rare that the child didn't clean her plate. He'd noticed the habit early on, even tested it once by giving her a huge portion to see if she could eat it all. Eleven had sat for almost an hour attempting to finish it, and the meal had finally ended when Jim told the girl that she never had to continue eating after she was full if she didn't want to, that she wouldn't get in trouble. She understood, and challenged Jim the next night when she decided not to eat any of the vegetables on her plate.

"Not hungry?" the man asked, pointing to her food with his fork.

El shrugged, lingering on a bite she didn't want to swallow. Her throat had begun to burn midway through the meal, and the food tasted like nothing. "Tired." she said, pulling her arms closer to her sides. "And cold."

Jim frowned, glancing over at the wood stove. The fire was a little low, and it was snowing outside again, so he made a mental note to go out for wood after he finished eating. The child put down her fork and finally swallowed, slightly grimacing at the feel of her raw throat. "You don't have to eat it all, Kid." Hopper reminded her. "Why don't you go take a bath and warm up? I'll get the fire goin' again."

Eleven nodded, dropping her plate off at the sink and retreating to the bathroom. While she bathed, Jim loaded the stove and turned on a movie, glancing outside at the fresh snow creating another layer atop their igloo as he read the paper and had a cigarette at the table. The child stayed in the tub for longer than usual that night, unable to get warm despite the steaming water. She was still cold when she sat on the couch, dressed in her warmest pajamas. Shivering, El immediately covered herself with a blanket and lay her head against the arm rest. The man roused her from half-sleep around eight when he asked if she wanted an Eggo or ice cream for dessert. El chose the latter, because even though she was cold it was becoming painful to swallow. It did make her throat feel better, but it brought on a cough. This didn't concern Hopper; she always coughed after eating ice cream, so did he. The child fell asleep that night while being read to, something that didn't happen often but wasn't unheard of. Distracted by his own exhaustion, Hopper went to bed soon after, but was woken in the middle of the night by a loud, deep cough coming from the bedroom. At first he thought there was someone else in the house because there was no way that sound could be coming from El, but when Jim pushed open the door he found a tight ball under a mound of blankets hacking away, each cough sending something in the room flying. Hopper stepped closer when he heard her raspy voice say something he didn't understand. Eleven rolled onto her back and coughed again, exposing a bloody upper lip and pink cheeks. Her mumbling was unintelligible, but she was clearly distressed about something, clutching the old bear she loved so much tight to her

chest. Her hair and clothes were stuck to her with sweat, and her pillowcase was smeared with blood.

When Jim reached to feel her sweaty forehead, the girl jerked away and burrowed further into the blankets, shivering. He'd only touched her for a second, but it had been enough to tell that she was burning up with fever. Hopper reached for her again, this time searching for a hand, and was surprised by her reaction when he found it. Instead of recoiling, El released the bear with one hand and held tightly to his. When she began speaking again, some of her words were understandable.

"Mike? I'm cold." Hopper picked out of the nonsense. She was tossing and turning but still holding his hand in a death grip. "Mike? Help!" her voice wasn't loud, but raspy and desperate, pleading.

Jim sat on the bed beside her and rubbed her back, pushing a damp curl out of her eyes and trying to slowly bring her to consciousness. "El, Kid? It's me, try to wake up. You're okay, I'm right here."

It was then that he noticed he was sitting in something warm and wet, and the man stood and pulled back the blankets to reveal a drenched bed and child. Hopper mumbled a curse on her behalf-she was always mortified and afraid he would be angry even though he never was-and began removing the blankets, an action that made Eleven stir again, coughing and curling further in on herself. He threw the soiled blankets to the floor and reached to gather the shivering little girl in his arms, wincing at how hot her small body was. El finally woke when Jim held her, lifting her throbbing head from his shoulder and gazing around the wrecked room in confusion and slightly trembling; she didn't remember having a nightmare, what had happened?

"Hopper?" she asked, her voice like razor blades in her throat. The world was fuzzy, her body felt heavy, sore, and she was freezing in clothes that were clinging to her.

"Hey, you're alright, it's okay. Let's just get you cleaned up." Jim said, moving on auto pilot to the dresser.

Tears welled in Eleven's eyes, embarrassed no matter how

understanding Hopper always was. Her body had never felt this way before though, so weak and *heavy*, like her limbs were hanging off of her by threads, and she was both miserable and terrified. "Something is wrong." she mumbled into Hopper's shoulder, nuzzling into his shirt to soak up her silent tears.

"Oh, El. You're just sick, it happens to everyone." The man tried to reassure her as they headed to the bathroom.

"Sick?" El asked when he set her down on wobbly legs. Papa told her she was sick before, after she used her powers too much, but this felt different, worse.

"Yeah, you get a fever and a cough and don't feel good." Jim said, holding the child steady as she shakily peeled off the clothes that were stuck to her skin with urine and sweat. He started the bath, but El refused to get in after dipping one foot into the lukewarm water-to her feverish body, it was freezing. She shook her head and shivered, grabbing a towel from the rack and wrapping it around her as tightly as she could to preserve what little body heat she felt she had.

"I know it's cold, but it'll help bring your fever down. You should wash off, too." The man said, swishing the water in the tub with his hand.

"No." Eleven said quietly, a tear spilling past her lashes. Even though Hopper explained she was sick, the girl still didn't understand why she felt so horrible. Jim was exhausted from being woken up in the middle of the night, and he had to make a conscious effort to refrain from snapping at the kid to get in the damn bathtub already. He recognized the look in her eyes though, confused and scared to death, and realized then that she'd probably never been sick before in her entire life. Living a secluded childhood behind a white walled cell didn't leave much room for attracting illness. Hopper felt stupid for having not even considered that El could get sick, that just because he was able to fight off the town's germs didn't mean she was, especially never having been exposed to them. *That's why her fever's so damn high*, he thought. *She's probably never had one before.*

"Hey, come here, El." Hopper said, opening his arms to the child. She stepped into them immediately, and he wrapped his tightly around

her shaking frame, warming her instantly. Jim pressed his lips against Eleven's head of growing curls and rubbed circles into her back, her body heat radiating through the towel. God, she was on fire. "I know you're scared. Getting sick is normal, it happens to everybody, it'll probably happen to me next. It feels like crap, but if you rest and drink lots of water you'll get better pretty quick. I know you feel cold, but your body is actually really hot, and a bath will cool you down and make you feel better. Just get in for a few minutes, just to clean up. Can you do that for me, Kid?"

Eleven burrowed further into his chest and took her time deciding before eventually nodding against his shirt. Slowly, the man helped her into the tub until the water was up to her shoulders. The child's teeth chattered and she shook, but there was nothing else he could think of to bring down her fever, and he didn't want to make it any colder seeing as she was suffering enough already. Jim didn't have any medical supplies at the cabin, no ibuprofen, no cough syrup, nothing. He'd have to stop at the store on his way into work tomorrow. Today. *Shit*. He hadn't even thought about that, but looking down at the barely conscious girl, he knew there was no way he could leave her alone for very long anytime soon.

"I'm gonna go change your sheets, okay?" He said, beginning to stand.

El's hand shot out of the water and grabbed his shirt, soaking the front of it. "Don't go."

Hopper sighed. "Kid, I'll be right back."

"No!" she said with more force this time, tears returning in her eyes. "Please!"

Jim hadn't seen her like this since the beginning, and even then she hadn't acted so desperate. She loved taking baths now, did them on her own. El could do just about everything on her own besides fall asleep. But shivering, crying, and curled up in the bathtub, Hopper couldn't stand to see it.

"Hey, okay, I'll stay, El, I'll stay. Don't cry, I'm right here." He took her hand that was still clutching his shirt.

She sniffled and shook again, a tear streaming down her cheek. "I want to get out."

"Just a little longer. I know it's cold, but it'll make you feel better. I won't leave, I promise."

Hopper was only able to keep her in the tub for about five minutes before her obvious suffering became too unbearable to watch. He helped her into clean pajamas and prepared to put her back in bed before he realized he still hadn't changed the sheets yet. Instead he deposited the child onto his cot, where she immediately wrapped herself in the blankets and curled into his pillow. Hopper brought the sheets out and found El half asleep in his bed, eyes glazed over and lips parted. He could hear a rattle in her chest every time she took a breath, and it made his throat close up.

El burrowed further into his blankets and stared at Hopper. "Stay here."

Jim sighed, throwing his head back in contemplation. It was rare that Eleven slept with him; he'd been trying his hardest to not allow that habit to form, mainly because his bed was already small enough with him in it. There had only been a few occasions when he allowed the child to sleep with him, but he figured being sick as a dog was a good enough reason. Besides, he didn't want to waste energy finding fresh sheets and making her bed again-this actually wasn't uncommon, many of the few times El slept with him had been after an accident because he was too tired to make the bed again. Resigning to his fate, Hopper switched off the lamp and crawled in next to the girl, who quickly folded herself tight against him, tucking her arms and legs close and pressing her ear to Jim's chest to hear and feel his loud, steady heartbeat. He held the girl close, noting that while she still had a fever, she was cooler than before her bath. They were both asleep moments later, but woke again near dawn when El got stuck in a coughing fit. She'd coughed before, of course, but'd never *had* a cough. It felt like there was something fluttering around in her chest and throat, but coughing only relieved the sensation momentarily, and even then the action was painful and forced her to inadvertently use her powers. Hopper got her sitting up in bed, propped against a few pillows, but it didn't help much. He had anticipated her to be up half the night coughing, but he did *not* expect the kid to puke all over

him due to her incessant hacking. Terrified and utterly confused as to what was happening, Eleven curled in on herself and began crying as a foul tasting substance was forced from her stomach and shot out of her mouth, covering Jim's shirt, his blankets, his bed. More than anything, Hopper wanted to curse and yell, jump out of bed and peel off his clothes and run into the shower, but he was halted by the sight of the kid. El was hunched over in sobs, still coughing and spitting up bile into her lap. Jim placed a hand on her back, mumbling probably meaningless reassurances until the child's breathing evened out, until the vomiting stopped and tears were silently rolling down her flushed cheeks.

"You're alright, Kid." He said, his words accompanied by Eleven's deep breaths. "You just threw up, it's okay."

She turned to him, eyes bloodshot and body shaking. "Threw up?"

"Food you ate comes back out of your mouth. It's part of getting sick, like having a fever and cough."

"Make it *stop*." The little girl pleaded, voice lingering on the last word and lower lip quivering.

Hopper hugged her as his heart clenched in his chest, not caring that he was getting more vomit on her clothes as well. How many times had he heard that exact phrase from his own daughter? He wanted more than anything to make their pain go away.

"I wish I could, Kid, but we can do is wait it out. I can..." Jim turned and glanced at the clock on the wall, almost six am. A drugstore would be open soon, at least by the time he got himself and El cleaned up. "I can go get some stuff to help though."

Eleven hugged him tighter, desperately. "No, don't go!" Her voice sounded like gravel.

"El, if you want to feel better I have to. I'll be back, I won't leave you alone for very long, I won't go to work, but I have to get you medicine, okay?" Hopper negotiated, realizing now that he'd have to make up an excuse to miss work.

"Medicine?" Even riddled with illness, Eleven was still perpetually curious.

"Yeah, it's this stuff that you drink that makes the fever and coughing go away for a little while. It'll make you feel better."

"Be back soon?" The girl asked, looking up at him with round, *tired* eyes.

"Yeah, but I'm not leaving yet, we gotta clean up first. Both of us." He said, glancing at the puke adorning the two of them.

El's lip quivered again at the mention of the mess she'd made-two of them in one night, both that he had to clean. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, don't worry." Jim said, rubbing her back comfortingly. "You didn't do anything wrong, stuff like this happens when you get sick."

He lifted the girl into his arms and made his way to the bathroom, stripping off his foul smelling shirt and helping Eleven out of her pajamas-*again*. She cleaned up first-another quick lukewarm bath-and after she was settled on the couch wrapped in blankets and watching cartoons with a giant bowl in her lap, Hopper finally showered. Before leaving for the store, he made her bed, changed the sheets on his own, and started a load in the washer. Setting a cup of water on the coffee table, the man tousled El's tangled bed-head and told her he'd be right back. The child watched with worry as he left, locking the door behind him and hoping that nothing else bad happened while he was gone.

The trip to the drugstore was short and sweet; Hopper grabbed a bottle of cough syrup and sleep suppressant, fever reducers, that minty crap to smear on her feet and chest, and a couple cans of soup. As he was clambering out of his car with the groceries, Jim realized he hadn't called into work yet. He radioed Flo, hoping to God she wouldn't give him too much shit. What was he even going to say?

"What's up, Chief?" The woman said, voice permanently curt.

He hesitated only a moment before faking a loud, dry cough. "I feel like hell, Flo," He said between hacks, trying his best to sound

authentic. "I can't come in today."

"Please don't. Feel better, Hop."

He didn't utter a reply, just grabbed the bag of medicine and strode towards the cabin. When Jim knocked, the locks slid open slowly, one by one. He figured she'd opened them manually, but upon stepping inside, saw her still on the couch watching cartoons, wiping blood from below her nose. That sent another wave of worry through him; El never bled doing mundane tasks like that, and it certainly never took her that long, either. How sick was she? Would this medicine even help? Would she need a doctor?

Eleven coughed as Hopper reached over the back of the couch to feel her forehead, which was even hotter than it had been earlier. "Shit," he mumbled, running a hand through her hair.

Everything hurt when she looked up at the man and asked, "Medicine?"

"Yeah, I got it right here. Give me a sec." Hopper said, dropping the bag in the kitchen and tearing open the wrappers. The girl hacked again, and Hopper poured a dose of cough syrup first. He brought it to the couch, got El sitting up against the pillows, and handed the tiny cup to her. She knocked the dose back quickly-it almost looked like she was taking a shot-and Jim would've laughed if Eleven hadn't immediately spit it back out all over him. He lurched away as red syrup splattered his shirt, uttering a sound of surprise and disgust.

"Jesus, Kid, what the hell?" he said, not yelling but clearly displeased.

El wiped her lips with the back of her hand and coughed, not quite catching a stream of red liquid that snaked its way down her chin and neck. "Gross!"

"Well shit, I know it doesn't taste good, but you don't have spit it all over me!" Jim was beginning to get a little impatient; he'd been up since-hell, he didn't even know what time-and this was the second thing that had come out of her mouth and onto him in the span of about two hours.

Remembering how she'd vomited on him before he left, tears filled Eleven's eyes at the sight of another mess she'd made. *Three*. "Sorry." the child mumbled, looking at her lap.

Hopper saw her quivering lip and immediately felt ashamed. "Hey, it's alright, El, I'm sorry too. I should've warned you that it would taste bad, I didn't even think about it." When was the last time *he'd* had cough syrup? Just remembering its flavor made him wince. "How about.." the man pondered, thinking of a way to get the girl to take it. Diane always put honey in Sara's medicine, but they didn't have any. He needed something that El would definitely not turn down. His mind replayed an incident that occurred two days prior, when he emerged from the bathroom to find the child squirting chocolate syrup straight from the bottle into her mouth. "What if I mix it with chocolate syrup?"

Eleven thought for a moment, contemplating whether trying the cough syrup again was worth the chocolate syrup. She decided it wasn't and shook her head.

Jim sighed. "El, this stuff *will* make you feel better. Unless you want to keep having cold baths, you've gotta take this, okay?" she still eyed him suspiciously. "I'll make it mostly chocolate syrup, alright? You won't even taste the bad stuff, please, will you just try?" Hell, negotiating with her was harder than getting a criminal to confess.

The girl took her time before finally relenting. Hopper returned with a cup filled with red-tinted chocolate syrup and passed it to the girl. She took a sip, but could still taste the medicine, so she handed it back to him.

"Goddammit," Jim muttered under his breath. He poured more chocolate syrup in. That time, El finished it.

"All done?" She asked, noting the other various bottles on the kitchen table.

Shit. Hopper hadn't realized how hard getting her to take one of the medications would be. She was definitely *not* all done; cough syrup wouldn't bring down her fever, and she needed to sleep after being up half the night. The man sighed and plopped onto the couch next

to her. She didn't have to take them all immediately, he mused. He could wait five minutes before giving the kid something else. "No, not yet, there's still more, but you can take a break."

"I didn't." the girl said, turning to him and appearing confused.

"You didn't what, Kid?" Hopper asked, equally flustered.

"Break something."

Jim chuckled, kissing the top of her head. "Double meaning word, taking a break means relaxing for a few minutes and doing nothing. We can do that before you have to take more medicine."

She just nodded in understanding, leaning her hot little body against the man's side. An hour later she was asleep in bed, after much negotiation over the rest of the medication. Hopper floated in and out of consciousness on the couch, startling awake every time he heard El cough. The rest of the day went on in the same manner; the girl would sleep for a few hours at a time, Jim waking up when her fever got too high and things started to float. She resisted the medication more and more each time he tried to give it to her. She despised the taste and the way it made her feel foggy, like she was in a dream. Hopper couldn't bear to force her, and bribing her with Eggos didn't even work because she refused anything but water. The only time he managed to get her to take any was cough syrup at bedtime, but she still woke up in the night anyway, sweaty and disoriented, barely registering the cool, wet cloth Jim held to her forehead. The man was up nearly all night every night and beside himself with worry, and Eleven stuck to him with a clinginess he'd never seen from her before. Hopper was forced to call into work for the next three days, though to his credit he did attempt to get out the door a few times, only for El to burst into tears and beg for him to stay.

It didn't take much pleading on her part, the poor kid was miserable and Hopper could easily see it. Much unlike his nature, Jim gave into El's every demand; he did everything for her. Held her water when she drank thirstily in the middle of the night, wiped her nose when she sneezed, propped her up with pillows when she coughed, held her when she cried, which was more than he'd ever seen before. El was *scared*. She'd never felt so weak before, not even after fighting

the Demogorgon. Any attempt at using her abilities brought on a horrendous headache, and every time she stood up she was hit with a wave of dizziness that forced her back down. What would they do if the Bad Men found them now? She couldn't protect herself or Hopper, and he would certainly be outnumbered. When she woke in the night, delirious from fever, she thought she could see their shadows on the cabin walls, swore she heard Papa's voice calling for her. Hopper just held her tight and rocked her on the bed until she calmed down enough to fall back to sleep. Her fever finally broke early on the fourth morning. She'd slept more that night than the others before, allowing Hopper a few hours of his own before she crawled into bed with him at some point. The man woke near dawn to find both of them dripping in sweat, beads of it rolling down El's face. When he touched her skin to help her sit, he found it clammy but cooler than she'd been in days. Eleven woke with a groan, rubbing her eyes and staring up at him in confusion as to why they were both soaking wet.

"Don't worry Kid, your fever broke. It's actually a good thing, means you're getting better." he tried a smile, brushing a dripping strand of hair from her face. It straightened out when it was wet and appeared longer, but he knew when it dried she'd be left with soft ringlets springing from the top of her head. Hopper wondered briefly who she got them from. When he'd met Terry, he didn't remember her having curly hair, and if Brenner was truly her father, he certainly didn't either. Her aunt had, though, what was her name? He couldn't remember but supposed it didn't matter. "Come on, I'll get you some clean clothes. Do you feel any better?"

El threw the blankets off of her and sat up on her own. "Hot." she said in her raspy little voice, tearing off her shirt. She wiped sweat from her forehead. "Hungry."

The words were music to Hopper's ears. "Really? What do you want to eat?"

He knew her answer as soon as he asked. "Eggs."

Jim leaned forward and kissed her head, salty with sweat. "Alright, let's clean up and you can have as many Eggsos as you want."

She only managed one, but did drink a significant amount of water and managed to stay awake for the majority of the morning, taking a nap around noon but waking a few hours later hungry again, this time for soup. Hopper was overjoyed to see the child eating again, he could tell already that she'd lost weight in the last few days. She spiked a low grade fever later that night but slept through the night and woke up without one. Jim was able to convince the girl to let him go to work, promising that he'd come back for lunch to check on her. He did, but she'd fallen asleep on the couch and it took a few minutes of knocking to wake her up. Miraculously, Hopper didn't catch whatever bug she'd had, and thank God he didn't; he'd missed nearly a week of work and was out of excuses to miss more.

By the time all of the snow had melted off, Eleven was well again, save for a few lost pounds. Hopper began taking his own precautions to keep the girl healthy, realizing that her illness had to have been spread by him considering he was the only person she had contact with. He made an effort to wash his hands more, especially when he first got home, and tried to change his clothes soon after as well. As the weather changed, so did their routine. Hopper was getting home a little later, but it was lighter outside for longer, and if it wasn't raining, they went for a walk every night after dinner. Once they startled a stag and her two fawns. Both parties froze in their steps and regarded each other silently before the deer family slipped silently into the woods. El's eyes were wide and sparkling, and later Hopper found a crude crayon drawing of the occasion in her bedroom. Jim changed up their reading routine as well; she read one chapter to *him*, then he read one to her. Her reading skills were fine, she didn't have any trouble sounding words out, she just didn't comprehend their meaning fully. Hopper thought reading aloud might help with that. Her speaking skills began developing further. She was using full sentences more often, especially when she asked questions, and could even hold an occasional conversation.

7. Chapter 7

In spite of typically being quiet and easygoing, El got herself into trouble every now and then. Jim didn't know what kind of misbehavior to anticipate from a child who'd been taught a very warped version of right and wrong, so what he received definitely came as a surprise. It started with the girl pushing his boundaries little by little to see how much she could get away with, like lightly kicking the table while they ate until he asked her to stop, or picking at parts of the wood on the cabin walls until he spotted and admonished her. Even though the behavior was annoying, it made Jim slightly proud that she was growing comfortable enough to act like a normal kid, then immediately kicked himself over the thought when he came home late one night to find all his beer cans overturned in the sink, but managed to keep his anger at bay knowing that he *had* forgotten to signal. He nearly lost his temper with her one weekend when he was home for the day. He'd fallen asleep during a movie she'd requested he watch with her, and woke up to El emptying his pack of cigarettes into the toilet. He wasn't as mad that she'd wasted his smokes as he was that she'd made eye contact with him when she flushed and clogged the toilet.

"If I can't fix this, Kid, we're stuck pissing outside." Jim said, plunger in hand. He'd thought about making her do it herself, but knew she wouldn't know how and he didn't want a mess.

El, who watched with growing guilt from the doorway, peeked outside briefly at the pouring rain. Hopper's warning was more than enough; the girl never put anything else inappropriate down the toilet, and apologized tearfully later that night, begging him not to force her back outside. Jim apologized too, both for falling asleep and for threatening her too roughly. She didn't misbehave again for a while, afraid of angering him and of how he'd punish her. But as the days and weeks passed, Eleven grew more confident both in herself and her relationship with Hopper, leading her to continue testing his limits. As spring progressed, Hopper slowly began integrating more diverse foods into the child's diet in hopes of getting her healthier. She ate everything and anything he gave her for the first few weeks, but was quickly discovering her favorite foods and started insisting

upon them at every meal. Jim got sick of pasta and frozen chicken pretty fast, and El became picky when it came to vegetables. She'd devoured her pork chops and bread with butter one night, but refused to touch the broccoli and carrots. Hopper had been watching her pick around them for the whole meal, and held up a hand to stop her when she stood up to put her plate in the sink.

"What about the rest of your food?" he asked. The child looked down at her plate, then back up at him.

"I don't like it."

"They're good for you though, Kid. C'mon, sit down have a few more bites." he gestured to her chair.

A stubborn expression took over El's face, a childish glimmer sparkling in her eyes. "No."

It wasn't the first time she'd blatantly disobeyed him, but it surprised Jim nonetheless. "Alright, no dessert then."

To Eleven, 'dessert' meant something sugary and sweet that was exclusively eaten after dinner, like ice cream, or cookies. Because Eggos didn't fall into this category, she assumed she'd won the argument and smiled proudly as she scraped her unfinished dinner into the garbage and put her plate in the sink. Hopper chuckled, wondering how she'd react when the time for dessert actually came. An hour or so later, El rose from the couch and into the kitchen for her usual nightly snack. Jim followed, and shut the refrigerator door before she could open it more than an inch.

"Whatcha doin?" the man asked. She frowned, confused. "I want Eggos."

"Remember what I said? No dessert 'cause you threw away your vegetables."

Eleven's eyes went wide. "No *Eggos*?"

"Nope." Her breathing picked up.

"But Eggos aren't dessert!"

"Kid, you eat them almost every night after dinner, that means they're dessert. No Eggos."

The child's face very suddenly contorted into such rage that for a moment Jim was sure she'd send him flying across the room. Instead, she clenched her fists and stalked to the bathroom, trying her best to slam the accorian door. He should've known then that he was in for it-she never shut the door all the way. The girl came out a few minutes later and seemed...oddly calm. She took a puzzle off the shelf and sat on the carpet in the living room to put it together. Hopper knew immediately that she was up to something, but was not at all prepared for what he found when he entered the bathroom. The entire can of shaving cream he'd bought that same day was lying empty on the floor, and the sink and mirror were covered in white foam, dripping sloppily onto the bathroom tiles. Hopper uttered a loud swear before marching back to the culprit. El heard him curse and saw him coming, knowing by his expression immediately that she'd gone too far this time.

"Hey!" the man barked, making the girl jump. He pointed at the bathroom. "Get your ass in there and clean that shit up. *Right* now."

The child's eyes were wide, and she sat still on the carpet, frozen in fear. Hopper had never yelled at her before. He was towering over her, glaring down so angrily that she was too afraid to get up and move past him. The next thing she knew, Jim was grabbing one of her arms and lifting her to her feet, pulling her towards the bathroom. His hands had only been gentle with her until that point, but now Hopper's grip wasn't his, it was one of the Bad Men locking her away in the small room again. If Jim hadn't left the door open after he ushered her into the bathroom, she might have lost it completely. Instead she stood in shock as he threw on his coat and stepped outside, slamming the door behind him. El watched through the window as he took a few steps into the woods before pausing and turning around, lighting a cigarette before sitting heavily on the steps of the deck. El composed herself enough to finish cleaning the bathroom before Hopper returned inside. She watched from the window until he put out his cigarette and stood up, then flew into her bedroom and was buried under the covers before the man walked inside. He stepped into the bathroom and saw no trace of the child or

the mess, and quickly spotted the lump on her mattress. Jim was still angry, so he left her in there without a word and plopped onto the couch to watch TV. He'd expected her to come out at some point during the evening, at least to brush her teeth or get water, but she remained in her bedroom for the rest of the night. By the next morning, Hopper had brushed it off as an act of now laughable childish defiance and went to wake her up to ask what she wanted for breakfast. Eleven was facing the wall and coiled tightly in on herself when he walked in, and he wondered briefly if she was cold. When the man tried to rub her back as he always did when he got her up in the morning, she was already awake and recoiled from his touch.

"You alright, Kid?" he asked with a frown, concerned. She didn't reply, just clutched her blankets tighter, and Hopper could see her shaking underneath them.

"Are you feeling okay?" he said, worried she might be sick again. He reached for her, but she threw the covers over her head and moved away from him. "Look, if this is about last night, I'm not mad anymore. Aren't you ready to come out and eat? You're always hungry first thing in the morning. What do you want for breakfast?" He received no response from the child. "El."

Hopper wasn't able to get her out of bed that morning; she refused to even look at him. He left toast and eggs on the table and took his own plate with him to work, filled with worry for the entire day. After extensive thought, the man realized how inappropriate his actions had been the night before. He didn't doubt that he had been entitled to his anger, but he shouldn't have cursed at her or physically forced her into the bathroom the way he did; Hopper had a lot to apologize for when he got home. He managed to get off a little early, and stopped at the store on the way home for a new can of shaving cream and a box of special chocolate chip Eggos, and at the last second decided to pick up a pizza for dinner. The girl let him in immediately when he knocked, but was nowhere to be seen when he stepped inside. Both the television and the turntable were off, which was unusual, and her breakfast was still sitting untouched on the kitchen table. The cabin looked exactly the same as he'd left it eight hours beforehand, as if no time had passed.

"El?" Jim asked as he took off his jacket. He glanced into her room and spotted the same lump on the mattress that was there when he'd left that morning. Now he was really worried. Had she not moved all day? Hopper sat on the edge of her bed just as he had earlier and, in the same manner as before, Eleven quickly moved away from him. A tight knot throbbed inside the man's stomach. He knew he'd screwed up and hurt her, but hadn't realized exactly how much.

"Kid, I've been thinking a lot today, and I'm really sorry about what happened last night." Hopper began with a sigh. "I shouldn't have yelled at you and I shouldn't have pulled you like that into the bathroom. I'm sorry if I scared you, I was angry and I made a mistake. Can you accept my apology?"

The child stopped trembling under the covers, but didn't speak and made no move to look at him. Jim slowly pulled the blankets from her head, revealing hair that had indeed been in bed all day, and tried again to touch the child. She flinched when he put a hand on her back, but didn't move away this time, and he heard her snuffle into the pillow.

"El, I'm not mad at you, okay? Will you please come out and have dinner with me? I brought pizza, and I have a surprise for you afterwards." he said, thinking of the chocolate Eggos he'd stopped for. "Really Kid, I'm not angry anymore, I promise." Finally she turned to look at him, and Hopper's heart clenched at the sight of her red, swollen eyes and splotchy pink cheeks; she'd been crying all day. Her voice was shaky and so quiet when she finally dared to speak.

"Promise?" The man wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb, and it was the first time all day that she hadn't jumped at his contact.

"I promise. C'mon, let's eat."

She allowed him to lead her by the hand into the kitchen, taking her breakfast plate from the table and replacing it with a paper towel and a slice of pizza. El wouldn't make eye contact with Hopper, but she devoured three slices like she hadn't eaten in years. He wanted to talk more with the girl about the incident the day before, but didn't know how to without traumatizing her further. Regardless of the emotional setback, Jim tried to think of this as a learning opportunity rather

than a total parental fuck-up. Though he knew he couldn't promise to never yell at her again, he did think he could manage to not manhandle her. Hopper could tell by the way she was watching his every move that the child was wary of him in the same way she had when he'd first found her. Even though she'd spent the whole day in bed, she hadn't slept at all or much the night before, and crashed fast on the couch when Hopper switched on the TV after dinner. He watched her as she slept fitfully, wondering what the hell he was going to do to win back her trust. It felt like he was starting from scratch all over again, unnecessarily questioning every minute decision he'd made thus far. When he woke her up with a warm plate of chocolate chip Eggos, her reaction made his heart clench. She looked stunned at the sight, as if she never expected to eat one again.

"You said no Eggos." her voice came out as a near whisper, still thick with emotion.

"Yeah, but just for yesterday. Did you think..." The revelation hit Jim suddenly, and any ounce of remaining annoyance he might have had over the previous days' shaving cream extravaganza dissipated completely. "Did you think I meant you could never have Eggos again?"

The child nodded and gripped her plate tighter, as if she thought he'd snatch it away. The man sighed and scratched his prickly chin anxiously, realizing that he'd screwed up yet again. He found himself forgetting how literally she took everything he said. He'd have to remind himself now to make his intentions crystal clear to avoid another angry misunderstanding. Hell, if Flo told him she'd never make coffee again if he didn't eat a healthy breakfast every day, he'd be pissed off, too.

"I'm sorry, Kid, that's not what I meant at all. I should've made sure you understood. I know why you got so angry now." he said. She didn't look at him, and didn't attempt to take a bite of her precious Eggos either. Hopper touched her knee, slowly, he made sure she knew it was coming. "I promise, El, it's okay, you can eat 'em."

She picked one up, eyeing and smelling it carefully. Jim smiled wearily. "Try it, they're chocolate."

At that El bit into one, then tore into it with as much enthusiasm as she'd had for the pizza. He watched as she devoured the waffles, worried now that he'd gotten her hooked on the chocolate chip ones. Hopefully they could negotiate that one without the child acting out in retaliation again. Unlike Sara's rare instances of misbehavior as a little girl, which were, for the most part, attention seeking, Eleven's thus far were exclusively revenge driven. Maybe if she had a better way to express herself she wouldn't feel the need to physically sabotage his belongings. Who could guess what stunt she'd pull the next time they had an argument? Refuse to let him inside the cabin? Cut the toes off all of his socks? Break the frame of his cot?

"Hey, lets talk for a second." Hopper said, switching the TV off. The girl had just finished her waffles and was quickly dissolving into the couch, already anticipating some form of reprimand. "You're not in trouble, remember? I just want to talk about it, okay?"

She nodded, albeit hesitantly, but a nod nonetheless.

"How did it make you feel when I told you that you couldn't have dessert yesterday?" She remained silent.

Jim sighed and ran a hand through his hair, trying summon a new tactic. "Alright, I'll go first, then. When you sprayed all of my shaving cream in the sink and on the mirror, I felt angry because I spent money on it for nothing, and now there was a mess." Hopper could see tears brewing in her eyes again and quickly tried to change the direction.

"But this morning when you wouldn't get out of bed, I felt very sad, because then I knew I hurt you, and I never wanted that to happen." Eleven let one tear dribble down her cheek, but caught the second with the back of her hand before it could fall. Hopper continued, trying not to lose his momentum. "So, how did it make you feel when I said no dessert last night?"

The child hesitated a moment before replying quietly. "Mad."

Hopper nodded. "Okay, good. Why were you mad?"

"I didn't get Eggos."

"I thought you understood that Eggos are dessert."

"No."

"No what?"

"Eggos aren't dessert."

"Why not?" El paused, trying hard to find the words. Hopper waited, knowing the explanation would come in pieces. "Dessert is...ice cream. Or cookies."

The man nodded, still confused. "Yes, they're all desserts." "It's..." she faltered, face starting to turn pink. "Dessert is only after dinner. At night."

"...that's right."

"But...I eat Eggos after lunch."

She had a point there. "Okay, I see what you're saying. How about this from now on; if I ever say 'no dessert again', it means Eggos too, okay? Sound good?" The child shook her head.

"No? Why not?"

"I want dessert."

Hopper finally smiled. "And you can always have it if you eat your vegetables."

Eleven's shoulders slumped and her lower lip stuck out, a classic pout over a classic debate. At least it wasn't accompanied by tears this time, just a whiny, "But I don't like them."

"I didn't like them either, but they really are healthy for you, and you don't have to eat all of them, just a few, okay?"

Her eyes narrowed. "How many?"

The man fought the urge to roll his eyes. "I don't know, I guess...three. If you eat three bites of each vegetable I give you, then

you can have anything you want for dessert. How's that?"

The girl matched his gaze for a moment before relenting with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Hey," Hopper said, putting an arm around her shoulders. "See how much better that was than having a big fight?"

Her eyes remained on her hands, fingers twisted into knots in her lap.

"I think we can both work on talking about how we feel instead of getting angry and doing something mean that we'll regret, yeah?" She was still looking down, and he tilted her chin up slightly. "El?"

"Yes." she agreed quietly.

"You can tell me how you feel anytime, Kid. Whatever emotion you have, its okay, you won't be in trouble as long as you don't use those feelings to...ruin my stuff."

El sniffled and nodded. "I feel...sad. I'm sorry."

"I know you are." Jim said, planting a kiss on the top of her head. "I'm sorry too. Let's do better next time, okay?"

The child nodded, tentatively leaning into his chest. Hopper held her there, rubbing the tension out of her back. Before he could ask if she wanted to read, she was asleep.

8. Chapter 8

As the spring rains began to taper off, summer surged in to take its rightful place. Eleven thought there was nothing she hated more than the drenching downpours of April and May, but stood corrected when the first of many heat waves passed through Hawkins in June. When Hopper returned home one evening, he found her naked on the hardwood floor, a bag of half thawed peas on her forehead. The next day he returned with three fans, which was where he usually found the child in front of when he returned home. He kept the freezer stocked with popsicles and the fridge with crisp lemonade, but it was still clear that Eleven was miserable in the stuffy heat of the boring cabin. Jim loved summer as a kid, had enjoyed going swimming with his friends at the local pool, or to the carnival, and the endless BBQ's and picnics. He was bummed that, for obvious reasons, he couldn't give El the same experience, but resolved to try his best when he came home for the third day in a row to find a human prune who had been soaking in a cold bath for hours.

Hopper picked up a cheap plastic pool similar to the one they'd used as a makeshift sensory deprivation tank the fall before, but smaller and easier to set up. He put it on the front porch in an attempt to both keep El out of the sun and out of sight, and he allowed the child to splash in it whenever he was home as long as he was outside with her. They often went for walks after the sun went down and it was cooled off enough. El detested blowflies and mosquitoes but was fascinated by fireflies and bullfrogs, showing no fear or disgust when Hopper held them out for her to touch. She was stung by a wasp one evening when they were sitting together on the deck, the scraps of their dinners having attracted it. The child had never seen the insect, and before Jim could warn her not to touch it, she grabbed the thing in her hand..

"Ouch!" she cried, immediately freeing the wasp and reeling her hand back to her chest protectively.

"Yeah, those bastards hurt, huh?" Hopper said, arm encircling her shoulder. "Lemme see."

Eleven held out her hand to him, tears welling in her eyes. He'd never

seen her cry in pain before and was reminded, suddenly, that sometimes she really was just a normal kid experiencing normal things, like getting stung by a bee for the first time. There were two swelling welts on the inside of her forefinger and one on her thumb. "Man, it got you good. They're called bees-well actually a wasp, probably, is the one that stung you."

"Stung?" she sniffled, cradling her fingers.

"Yeah, you got stung. Bees have this sharp little piece on their body that has venom in it, that's what's making your fingers hurt." he explained, wiping away an escaped tear from her rosy cheeks..

"Make it *stop*." El pleaded. She'd said that to him before, it was her way of telling him she was in pain, and each time it had broken his heart.

Make it stop, when she stubbed her toe walking barefoot outside.

Make it stop, when she bit the inside of her cheek chewing gum for the first time.

Make it stop, when she ate ice cream too quickly and got a brain freeze.

"Come inside, a bag of cold peas will help." Jim said.

Holding the makeshift ice pack to her throbbing hand atop the kitchen counter, the child pondered over the incident. "Hopper?"

"Yeah?"

"Why did the bee...stung me?"

"Sting you?" he clarified, smiling. "Because you were trying to touch it, it got scared and defended itself." *Sort of like you*, he thought.

"But..." she started, pondering. "Fireflies don't sting."

"You're right, only some insects can sting. Everything and everyone is different from each other, even bugs."

She was quiet again for a moment before blurting out angrily, "I *hate* bees."

Hopper laughed and tousled her hair. "I'm not a big fan of 'em either."

The man brought his grill over from the trailer and introduced her to cheeseburgers and chicken wings and corn on the cob, all of which she thoroughly enjoyed while they ate together on the deck. One night, Jim surprised her with a big bag of groceries and a bundle of firewood. El was confused; they hadn't needed a fire in weeks, and that day had been particularly hot. Before she could even ask, the man gestured her outside, where he tasked her with searching for the biggest rocks she could find. Rising to the challenge, the girl brought him as many as she could carry, and watched as Hopper constructed a crude firepit and helped her roast hot dogs and s'mores for the first time. Later, when she fell asleep in his lap under the stars, she resolved that summer, much like winter and spring, wasn't as bad as she'd originally thought.

The child's anxiety continued to decrease the longer she spent in a safe and loving environment, so much so that she was sleeping through the night on most occasions. With her nightmares fading, the fear surrounding falling asleep that had once gripped her so tightly was finally loosening its hold. Hopper noticed this, and was more than pleased when she became capable of falling asleep by herself. The process had been a slow one though, with Hopper taking baby steps each night at bedtime. Since he'd found her, the only way El went down was if he sat under the lamp in a chair by her bedside and held her hand, so he started with not touching her but remaining by her side. After a few nights of that, he turned the lamp off. Then he was able to stand in the doorway, and a few nights after that she allowed him to sit on the couch as long as he was within her sight, door open and lamp on-though she hadn't needed the light until he left the room, and after a couple days of adjustment she stopped needing it again. This leap in her sleeping habit was a huge relief for Jim; he'd hardly had any time to himself since she came into his life, and that wasn't a bad thing, just sometimes a very exhausting one. Hopper found himself with significantly more patience for the child when he was given a few hours alone at night. Even though bad dreams haunted Eleven less and less, she was still healing from an

entire lifetime of abuse, and a different trauma response crept in and took residency over her nightmares.

The first time Jim caught El sleepwalking, he didn't realize that was what was happening. He woke in the middle of the night to find the girl standing over one side of the running kitchen sink, but the cup she was apparently trying to fill wasn't anywhere near the stream of water.

"Kid? What're you doin'?" Hopper asked sleepily from his cot, propping himself up on his elbows. The child didn't move, her bare legs practically glowing in the moonlight underneath the oversized shirt of his she'd slept in. "El?"

When he still didn't receive a response, Jim groaned and creaked into the kitchen. She didn't even turn her head at the sound, and when he stood beside her, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. El's eyes were wide open, but glassy and blank, staring unblinkingly at the wall behind the sink. She was frozen, still as a statue, and didn't flinch when Hopper touched her shoulder gently.

"Hey, are you alright?" He asked, trying to turn her with a gently pull on her chin. She moved her head but not her eyes. "El, look at me. What's wrong?"

The child opened her mouth as if she were about to speak, only to shut it again slowly. Jim attempted to take the empty cup from her hand, but she had it in a death grip and refused to give it to him. "Are you thirsty?"

"Yes." came her whisper of a response, still frozen and unblinking.

"Okay, well, are you gonna get it or do you want me to, 'cause you're wasting water." He asked.

She mumbled something but he didn't understand. She was still holding the cup but hadn't made a move it towards the faucet. Hopper sighed and adjusted her arm for her, thinking maybe that would snap out of whatever daze she was in. It didn't though, and didn't seem to notice when her cup overflowed and water spilled over her wrist and hand.

"El, what is going on with you?" Jim asked worriedly after he turned the sink off. "Did you have a bad dream or something?"

"Water." she said, barely audible.

"You have a cup of water in your hand, Kid." Jim said, guiding it towards her mouth.

She took a tiny sip, then a sloppy gulp, and soon all of it was gone, trails of water streaming down her neck and soaking the front of his shirt she'd worn to sleep. The cup remained in her vice-like grip even after it was empty, and she went back to staring right through him, droplets of water still dripping off her chin. When Hopper waved his hand in front of her eyes, he received no reaction, and that's when it finally hit him. Though he'd never been a sleepwalker before, he'd known someone in basic training who was. Sometimes when Jim woke up in the middle of the night, the guy would be cleaning his gun with his underwear or a sock instead of a rag, and couldn't hear anyone when they asked him what the hell he was doing. That was almost funny though, and certainly didn't freak him out like this did.

"Let's get you back to bed, I think you're sleepwalking." Jim said, even though he wasn't sure his words were registering. He managed to pry the empty cup from her hand and led her by it out of the kitchen, but she stopped again when they reached the couch. The girl slipped her hand from his crawled clumsily over the armrest and onto the cushions, the way a drunk would, slouching herself barely upright. "El, come on, back to your room. I'll lay down with you if you want."

"Tired." she said, louder this time.

"I know you are, let's go back to sleep."

"No." her eyebrows pinched together but her eyes remained glazed over.

"I don't understand, if you're tired then come get in bed."

"No!" her voice suddenly rose in volume, leaving Hopper glancing around to make sure she wasn't going to send anything flying at him.

"Why not?"

"I..." El started, pausing when she began to rub hard at her eyes. She was starting to fade already.

"Come on, kiddo." Hopper said, reaching with the resolve to just pick her up.

"No!" she tried to push him away but missed, arms shoving weakly at the empty space next to him. "Sleep."

"El, you can go to sleep as soon as you get back in bed."

Instead, she slid so that she was lying down on the couch, eyes heavy and starting to actually blink now, slow and hard. She groaned and curled into a tight ball, knobby knees tucking up into her T-shirt.

"You wanna sleep on the couch?" he asked. El barely managed a nod. Hopper grabbed a blanket and pillow from her bedroom, but she wasn't aware of him tucking her in and watching her drift away.

When El woke up to an unfamiliar ceiling the next morning, she jolted upright quickly and took note of her surroundings. Why was she on the couch? She remembered falling asleep in bed the night before, after Hopper ushered her into her room when her head started to drop near the end of a movie they'd already seen. She didn't remember having a nightmare, and her pajamas hadn't been changed, so what had happened?

Hopper, who was reading the newspaper at the kitchen table, saw the girl startle awake and glance around in confusion. "Hey, Kid." he said, getting her attention. "How'd you sleep?"

"Why...am I here?" she replied from the couch.

"Do you remember what happened last night?"

The child shook her head, feeling a rock drop into her stomach. What had she done? Was he mad? Hopper put down the newspaper and picked up his coffee, joining the girl in the living room.

"You were walkin' around last night while you were asleep. I found

you trying to get a drink of water, and after you didn't want to get back in bed, you wanted to sleep on the couch."

El stared at her lap, trying her hardest to recall the events of the previous night but coming up blank. "I..." she started, unsure of what to say.

"It's alright, Kid, you didn't do anything wrong. Other people sleepwalk too, I've just never seen you do it before."

Her eyes remained on her knotted fingers, her voice was tiny when she spoke. "Mad?"

Hopper wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her into his side. "Not at all. It was actually kind of funny."

The child finally looked at him with a small, confused smile. "Really?"

"Yeah. You were trying to get a drink of water but you couldn't fill up the cup, and when you finally took a drink you spilled it all over yourself." he replied with a laugh.

Luckily, El didn't see his laughter as mocking, and actually joined in with a giggle of her own. "I don't remember."

"People don't usually remember walking in their sleep. Can you remember what you were dreaming about?"

El thought hard, trying to recall anything. It had only been recently that she'd started having dreams that weren't exclusively terrifying, so the concept of an enjoyable one was still new to her. The longer she pondered, though, the more came back to her.

"We were walking outside." she finally said. "It was hot."

"You and me, in your dream?" Hopper asked.

"Yes." she said, thinking for a minute again before suddenly glancing up at him, eyes sparkling for the first time that morning. "And you didn't bring water!"

Hopper barked out a laugh before kissing the child's bedhead. "Well, the next time we go on a walk, I promise I'll bring some."

"I want water now." El said when she realized how parched she was again, and pushed herself away from the man and into the kitchen, filling the cup with ease this time.

The sleepwalking practically replaced the nightmares, plaguing the child once or twice a week throughout the summer months. At first, the episodes were funny, like when Hopper woke to El trying to dress herself, frustrated that she was unable to wear a shirt as pants, or when she tried to take a shower and he caught her just as she was about to step in, still in her pajamas. He was never able to get her back down in her own bed afterwards, and even though she wouldn't fully wake up she was insistent and stubborn upon where she slept. If Jim allowed her she would always choose his bed, but many times she wound up in odd places, like the floor of her closet or under the kitchen table. After a while the occasions just became annoying; she'd often wander around the cabin aimlessly, sometimes for almost an hour, but Hopper couldn't just go back to sleep because she'd bump into things, and the loose objects that floated around would break when they fell if he didn't catch them. Often during the occasions she would call out for Mike, search the whole house as if he'd be hiding in the cupboards or behind the shower curtain. She screamed and fended off Hopper wildly if he tried to touch her without talking her down first. Because the spells had been relatively harmless, however, Jim was unprepared and caught very off guard when a far and few between nightmare was paired with a suddenly mobile kid.

Hawkins had experienced the first summer thunderstorm of the year that day. It rolled in around late afternoon, and as soon as he saw the first bolt of lightning flash into the sky, Hopper jumper in the blazer and headed for the cabin, knowing from her reaction to the fireworks on the Fourth of July-he realized then that that was why she'd been up so early on New Years Day when he found her-that she didn't like loud noises like that, or at least didn't like to be alone when they were happening. It was a downpour by the time he got to the cabin, and the thunder had been rumbling non-stop; Jim hadn't seen a storm to this degree in years. It was so loud that it took a minute for El to hear his knocking and discern it from the constant crashing. The

child ran to him immediately, shaking violently in his arms when he wrapped them around her. It seemed like they sat on the couch to wait the storm out forever, Eleven jumping every time there was a sudden flash of anything, light or noise. But the clouds finally parted just as the sun set, and he convinced the girl to watch it with him from the porch. She actually fell asleep early that night-something they would later realize triggered the sleepwalking-and Hopper had a couple beers after she fell asleep (or three), causing him to crash harder than usual after the long day. Had it been any other night, he would have heard her come out of her room as she ran past his bed. Instead, he woke to Eleven violently attempting to pry open the front door, which was still held shut by the four sliding locks. She was clumsy and had a hard time using her hands when she slept-walked, as if she was wearing oversized mittens. Her movements were normally slow and sloppy, weak, her body not fully under her control. This time she was rigid and strong, pulling on the doorknob with all of her strength, and whimpering, glancing over her shoulder every few seconds like someone was chasing her. When Hopper woke with a start, all he saw was the child trying frantically to escape, and he acted without thinking, only making the situation worse.

"What the hell are you doing?" He yelled, launching himself out of bed.

The second his fingers seized her shoulder, she screamed and threw him backwards without even looking at him. Jim tumbled over the back of the couch and rolled onto the coffee table, breaking one of its legs. He scrambled back up and started for her again, only to be held in place a few steps away. Being under her spell was an odd sensation; everything went numb except for the tips of his fingers and toes. Hopper realized she was dreaming when he saw how much trouble she was having with the locks and heard her begin to mumble unintelligible words under her breath. Her focus on keeping him frozen began to dissipate, and Hopper fought through it until he was able to move freely again. He tried to speak soft words of reassurance in hopes that they'd break through her haze and she'd hear them.

"Hey, come on, Kid, you're just having a bad dream. Try to calm down, alright? Everything's fine, you're safe at home and I'm right here."

The girl's mumbles turned to whimpers, then quiet sobs as she began rubbing her eyes, blood staining her upper lip. This was usually a sign that she was coming out of it, but when he tried to touch her again she still recoiled, this time falling to the floor and crawling backwards away from him, her eyes frantic but unfocused. Around them, things were floating, some of them flying at him. It had been a long time since he'd seen her afraid of him like this during a nightmare, and she'd never been so inconsolable before. Hopper continued to repeat words of reassurance, but she was still paranoid, glancing around them frantically at things only she was seeing.

"It's *coming*!" El screamed suddenly, pushing past him and attempting again to open the front door. She was yanking hard on the handle, twisting and turning and pulling with her whole body, but not trying to unlock it first.

Jim put his hands on her shoulders gently, but she squirmed away from him with a screech and tried to run away but wound up bumping hard into the couch, which threw her off balance and sent her tumbling. El clipped her forehead on the doorway when she stumbled into her room, and fell hard on her knees. Hopper rushed to help her, but she scrambled away from him again, hitting the back of her head on the bed frame as she crawled underneath it. The man couldn't reach her under there, and even if he could, she'd surely still fight him off. He sat against the wall with a sigh, his chest aching every time he heard the little girl under the bed whimper and snuffle, hating more than anything that there was nothing he could do to comfort her when she was in this state. El didn't remember what she did when she slept-walked, but she *did* remember her nightmares, and he wondered if she'd come out of it and seek him for comfort, or fall back to sleep under there on her own.

It took a few minutes of sitting still for Jim to realize he was bleeding. There was a long gash that ran down the back of his right arm, probably from when he broke one of the legs on the coffee table. The wound wasn't deep and didn't hurt too badly, but it was big. He knew the child would feel horrible if she knew she'd hurt him. Hopper realized suddenly how dangerous Eleven could be. It's not like he didn't know she'd killed people before, or that she could do unimaginably incredible things without lifting a finger, but it

wasn't until then that he'd considered his own personal safety at risk. There had been countless times over the past six months that he'd almost broken down and called Joyce to tell her everything, to have someone else to help him. As much as he'd come to love Eleven, genuinely love her, he also wished that Joyce had been the one to find her instead. Surely she'd be able to better help the child, would be able to be there for her in a way that he couldn't. But if she had, Joyce and her boys might be in the same position Hopper was in now, sleep deprived and bruised to hell. He didn't want that for them; they were probably sleep deprived enough already, and it wasn't worth it to put the boys at risk of getting hurt. In the moment, it was the only thing that kept Jim from calling the woman and telling her everything.

Eventually the child's cries tapered off and turned into the heavy breathing of deep sleep. Hopper tried to pull her out from under the bed, but his arms weren't long enough. Instead he turned on the lamp at her bedside, examining the child in the light. Her forehead was spotted with blood from where she'd smacked it, and he was sure she'd have a goose egg on the back of her head in the morning. He cleaned the gash on his arm but returned to her bedroom instead of his cot, unable to leave her under there alone in the fear that she either wouldn't wake up or would wake up screaming. Jim spent the rest of the night on the floor, but hardly slept and heard the child immediately when she began to stir as the sun rose. He was awaiting her open eyes with his own when she finally woke with a frown, hand grazing her forehead.

"Hey, Kid." Jim said when she winced and pulled away her fingers.

El whimpered in confusion and pain, crawling slowly out from under the bed and into Hopper's lap. She tried to lay back against his chest, but winced again and touched a knot on the back of her head. The man looked down at her sadly.

"It was a pretty bad one last night." he said. "Do you remember anything?"

"A monster." the child answered quietly, her lower lip wobbling.

"The one that took Will?" Hopper asked, slightly surprised. Out of all

the horrible dreams Eleven had shared with him, none of them had been about the Demogorgon.

The girl shook her head. "Different. Bigger." She squeezed her eyes shut, remembering not so much the images she'd seen but the feeling they gave her; one of utter helplessness.

Jim dropped a kiss into her hair before pulling back to examine her forehead. Blood was dried and crusted around the wound, making it hard to see how deep it was. The man calmed himself with the fact that it had stopped bleeding and stood with the girl, back and knees popping noisily.

"Let's go clean off your head." he said, helping her to her feet. She took two steps and stopped, swaying on her feet before Hopper steadied her. "Just take a few deep breaths."

When the spell passed, Hopper sat the girl on the kitchen counter and blotted at her forehead with a wet cloth. She didn't protest, but did hold his other hand tightly, squeezing harder when it hurt the most. The man determined-thankfully-that the gash wasn't deep enough to warrant stitches, so he plastered a big band-aid on it, taking care to avoid her eyebrows and growing head of hair. He checked out the bump on her crown as well, and while there wasn't much to see, he could easily feel it, and Eleven pushed his hand away with a whine when he touched it. He was worried she had a concussion, so he waited until after noon when he was sure the child was alright to leave for work. Shortly after that episode, the pair began paying more attention to what might be contributing to her sleepwalking. They noted that it occurred on the nights that El fell asleep before ten and on the nights that she went to sleep directly after watching TV instead of reading together before bed. The simple changes they made to her sleeping habits helped considerably, and by the end of the summer, Eleven was sleeping through the night on most occasions; it was rare now that she left her bed or cried out for Hopper.

Unfortunately for the man, however, he couldn't seem to catch a break with the kid. It seemed like when one unpleasant behavior was finally resolved, a different one swooped in right away. As the leaves began to change color and the evenings grew cooler, Eleven became

increasingly stir crazy. She paced the cabin during the day while he was gone, alternating between blasting the television at full volume to pretend that she wasn't alone, or turn it to static and visit her friends in the Void. Watching them together filled her with melancholy and longing; she was glad that they were safe but wanted desperately to join them. The more time she spent in the in-between, the better she got at staying there, but she was still always drained afterwards.

The child pestered Jim constantly about when she could go out and see her friends, especially Mike. She listened to him talk to her every night in addition to observing him periodically throughout the day, and now more often than not, Mike was either angry and venting when he spoke to her or depressed and teary. El couldn't stand to hear him cry; she always left when he really broke down. Hopper tried his best to distract her when he was home, but for the majority of the day and the majority of the week, he wasn't, and there wasn't much he could do to quell her bubbling restlessness. Jim knew he was approaching borrowed time when El started rejecting his offers to read with her at night, choosing instead to watch the damn Wheeler kid until her nose bled. He hated watching Eleven torture herself, but never stopped her from doing it. Somehow he knew how vital it was to the both of them, and despite the stern face he wore when he repeatedly told the girl 'soon', his words burned his tongue with guilt.

9. Chapter 9

Jim felt the girl in his arms go suddenly limp, and for a moment his heart stopped. He pulled away, and Eleven's head fell forward into his chest, her eyes shut and her breathing deep and even. *She's fine*, Hopper said to himself, *just asleep*. Just exhausted. The man looked back over his shoulder at the spot where once, just moments ago, an inexplicably evil force tried unsuccessfully to overtake the powerful telekinetic child that was unconscious in his arms. Now there was just a wall, and they were no longer hanging over the entrance to hell, but kneeling on the floor of an elevator deep within a lab, the same lab the child he was holding had once been held prisoner in. That thought drove Jim to stand, gather Eleven against his chest, and press the button that lifted them up, out, and away, hopefully to never return.

Hopper didn't realize how tired he was until he had to carry the girl up the same flight of stairs they came down. She wasn't heavy by any means-he still thought she was much too light-but his adrenaline rush had long since ended, leaving him huffing and puffing as he climbed. Jim cursed under his breath when he came across Sam Owens for the second time that night, and the fading doctor opened his eyes at the word. He smiled weakly at Hopper, who glanced around the stairwell as if in search of an answer. He looked down at the injured man, then to the child in his arms, then back to Dr. Owens.

"I know I already said this, but don't go anywhere," Hopper turned on his heel and continued the climb. There was no way he could carry both of them, and there was no way Dr. Owens was walking out of there by himself.

The cold November breeze shocked Jim as he exited Hawkins Lab; he felt Eleven curl further into his chest at the biting wind. Once at his Blazer, Hopper layed the child down in the back seat, peeling off his jacket and tucking it around her, slightly shocked that it almost covered her completely. Was this sleeping little girl really the same one who had just closed a portal to another dimension? Before he could dwell on it, an image of Dr. Owen's leg infiltrated his mind, and Jim shut the car door, locked it, and headed inside to carry yet

another person back out.

He got lucky; Owens was actually able to walk with Hopper's help, and even climbed into the car by himself. Jim got in as well, glanced over his shoulder to check on Eleven, started the ignition, and looked back again at the still sleeping girl. At this, Owens did the same, and caught Hopper watching him closely from the corner of his eye. The injured doctor winced as he turned to face forward, and Jim took this as his cue to begin the drive to the hospital.

"What're you gonna say happened?" Hopper asked when he pulled up to the ER entrance. They hadn't spoken for the entire ride.

"I'll tell ya, Jim," Dr. Owens said weakly. "My neighbor's dog is a piece of work."

Hopper gave him a small smile before helping the doctor into the lobby, promising as he left that, "I'll pay you a visit soon."

As Jim climbed back into his car and checked on Eleven again-still out cold-he brushed a heavy hand through his hair and let out a deep sigh. More than anything, he wanted to take the kid home, lay her in bed, and fall asleep beside her, but he knew that Wheeler and all her other friends would blow a gasket if they didn't get to see her again tonight. So, with many reservations, Hopper headed in the direction of Joyce Byers' house.

Mike stood in front of the broken window, shaking his hands nervously. He'd already tried radioing the Chief-only a hundred times-but to no avail. Mike began pacing across the length of the window, and this time Lucas didn't reprimand him; he was worried, too. The group had gotten back shortly before Joyce, Jonathan, Nancy, and Will arrived, the youngest being hardly conscious and on his feet. After the initial greetings and inevitable explanations-*Will you won't believe it, Eleven's back!*-Joyce promptly took him to bed, Jonathan following. Nancy stayed beside a very concussed Steve, alternating ice packs frequently. Dustin was seated beside Steve while Lucas and Max sat on the floor leaning back against the couch. Despite everyone's exhaustion, the tension was palpable in the air, and there was no way any of them were falling asleep.

Watching Mike pace beside the window, Max felt a sudden surge of sympathy for him. Mike had been an asshole to her-*definitely*-but now at least she kind of understood why. It was hard to hate someone who went to such great lengths to protect their friends, even if she wasn't included. Heaving a sigh, Max decided to attempt some kind of friendship one last time before completely resigning to failure. She approached Mike, and when he turned to face her, for the first time, he wasn't angry at her.

"El's gonna be okay, Mike." Max said.

Mike stared at her for a long time before finally replying. "I hope so."

"I mean, the lights, it had to be her."

The boy only nodded. There was a long pause, and Max was about to return to her spot on the floor in defeat when Mike finally spoke again. "Driving us out there, that was pretty cool. I'm...I'm sorry I was a jerk to you. That wasn't fair."

Max's eyes flew open. She wanted desperately to make a snide remark, but held back in fear of losing Mike's newfound favor. Instead, she just smiled and felt her heart swell in her chest. "Thanks, Wheeler."

"I can make a Zoomer class if you want." Mike replied.

Max just smiled again. "I only played that game once, you'll have to teach me."

Lucas stood from his place on the floor. "We still have to teach El, too."

"I thought she was already a Mage?" Max asked, confused.

"No, she just would be, because of her powers. She never played with us." Mike said, sounding forlorn.

"We didn't really get to just...hang out with her, cause of everything with Will. We only knew her for a week." Lucas replied.

"Yeah, I dunno if she'd even understand D&D." Dustin said, striding

over to join the conversation.

"Why not?" Max said.

"Because she was stuck in the lab her whole life. She didn't even know how to tell time, or what a friend was." Mike answered, anger clouding his anxiety.

"Yeah, she tried to get naked in front of us!" Dustin laughed at the memory.

"Dustin shut up, that was last year!" Mike said, shoving him.

"Why doesn't she like me?" Max asked to change the subject, even though she was curious about its backstory and would remember to ask Lucas for an explanation later.

Mike seemed puzzled by her question, not having seen Eleven's cold rebuff, but Lucas and Dustin understood. "She just doesn't know that many people, she's pretty shy." Lucas said.

"Yeah, and she doesn't talk very well, so don't take it personally." Dustin said.

"She talks fine!" Mike snapped.

From his spot on the couch, Steve could overhear the kids' debate over Eleven's verbal skills, their words echoing painfully inside his head. He turned to Nancy, who was holding an ice pack in place on his cheek. "They talkin' 'bout the goth girl?" he asked.

Nancy smiled. "Yeah, Eleven. Did you never hear about her?"

Steve could only shake his head painfully.

"Mike found her in the woods last year when Will went missing. She killed the monster, she can move things with her mind." The concussed boy nodded, a wave of pain throbbing through his very broken nose.

"And now she lives with the Chief?" Max asked, still confused over that relationship.

"Asshole." Mike mumbled angrily.

"Yeah, I think maybe he's like her dad now." Dustin answered.

Speak of the devil, a sudden glare of headlights turned everyone's heads. Without skipping a beat, Mike dashed out the door and was at the blazer before Hopper had even come to a full stop. "Eleven, are you okay?" He peered into the passenger set and saw it empty; his heart nearly came to a stop.

Mike didn't realize Hopper had even gotten out of the car until his hand was on his shoulder. He turned to face the man who'd hidden Eleven from him for an entire year, anger still fuming inside of him, but currently buried under worry. "Where is she, Is she okay?"

Jim smiled weakly and opened the back door, lifting a sleeping girl into his arms. "She's fine kid, just exhausted. Get the door, would ya?"

Mike's eyes filled with tears of relief as he compiled, and once inside, Hopper quickly located the couch and layed the child down. The moment he stepped back, Mike knelt on the floor and took Eleven's hand in his and lightly squeezed her fingers. An instant later the rest of the kids were at her side and asking questions over one another.

"Holy shit, did she do it?" Dustin.

"Is she gonna be okay? Can she move?" Lucas.

"Oh my God, there's blood in her *ears*!" Max.

"Hey hey, she's just asleep, and it needs to stay that way, alright?" Hopper snapped, protectiveness on high alert. Max, Lucas and Dustin stepped back, but Mike didn't budge.

Hopper rolled his eyes just as Joyce entered the living room, attention locked on Eleven. "Is she.."

"She's okay." Jim said. "She closed it."

The room let out a collective sigh, and both Hopper and Mike glanced at the girl with pride.

"We should clean her up, Hop." Joyce said. "Look at her."

She was right; Eleven's pale face was covered in crimson, blood smeared under her nose and across her cheeks and chin, black eyeshadow smudged with it. Her hair stuck to her skin with sweat, as did her clothes.

Joyce turned to Jim. "Help me get her into the bathroom, then you can make up the couch for her."

"Joyce, I can take her to the cabin. I just knew the kids would wanna see her first."

"Hop, that place is a mess. Stay here, her friends need her."

He knew she was right. Jim sighed in defeat and retrieved the sleeping girl from the couch, carrying her into the bathroom. Eleven floated in and out of consciousness as Hopper sat her on the toilet top and held her steady while Joyce untied her shoes. The next time she opened her eyes, Joyce was helping her into the running shower and Hopper was gone. The woman wiped El's face clean and washed the gel out of her hair as water rained down on her, where she sat with her knees tucked to her chin. The woman was just helping Eleven step out and wrapping her in a towel when Jim returned.

"Everything alright?"

"Yes," Joyce replied, steadying the swaying child. El would have been unable to stand without the support. "Pajamas?"

Hopper passed her a pair of Will's, and Joyce used the towel to dry the girl's hair. Eleven opened her eyes again, and this time she actually registered who was helping her.

"Will?" she asked, her voice quiet and very weak.

"He's fine, honey. Everyone's okay, just relax." she said, pulling the pajama shirt over El's head and guiding her arms through the sleeves, the same way she'd dressed Will and Jonathan as toddlers so long ago.

"Where is Will?" Hopper asked, suddenly realizing he wasn't with the

other kids or in his bedroom.

"My room. Jonathan's with him." Joyce answered.

A small smile tugged at El's lips before she started to fade again. At this, Jim scooped her up and returned to the living room, placing her on the couch and pulling a blanket up to her shoulders. Eleven vaguely registered Mike's presence beside her, and Mike couldn't believe she was really here, right in front of him, living and breathing and holding his hand. The kids surrounded her again, leaving more room and lowering their voices this time.

"See Mike, we told you she'd be fine," Lucas gave his friends a knowing look.

"I'm glad she didn't disintegrate like last time." Dustin said. "That was so mental!"

"She disintegrated? For real?" Max asked.

"Yeah, she was like..." The conversation became background noise as Jim felt his pockets for a cigarette. As he did this, he noticed for the first time that the Harrington kid was seated on the opposing couch, and Nancy Wheeler was holding a bag of frozen peas to his forehead. His face was even bloodier than El's had been; one of his eyes was beginning to swell completely shut.

"What the hell happened to you?" Hopper asked, an unlit cigarette dangling between his lips.

"I'm fine." Steve answered, voice muffled by his swollen cheeks.

"It was Billy," Dustin replied. At this, Max elbowed him hard in the stomach. "Ow, what! He's gonna find out sometime, plus you took out that guy's mailbox!"

"Dustin, shut *up*!" Mike hissed.

"It's fine, Chief, Billy didn't see anything." Lucas said, smiling at the redhead beside him. "Max made sure."

Jim eyed the concussed teenager closely, ignoring-for now-what

Henderson had said. He didn't want to make another trip to the hospital tonight, but it was obvious that Steve's nose was broken, and he was probably in a significant amount of pain.

It was as if Steve could read his mind. "I'm okay. I won't fall asleep."

Hopper sighed, but gave in. "Just...make sure your parents take you to a doctor." All Steve could do was nod painfully and give a weak smile in return.

Jim lit his cigarette just as Joyce emerged from her bedroom, and wordlessly, both of them stepped out onto the porch. He took a long pull and passed it to Joyce, who took a small one and coughed. "Some things never change, right?"

He smiled as she lit her own preferred brand, and he blew out a puff of smoke, watching the breeze carry it away. Standing on her front porch, Jim could almost imagine that none of that days' events had occurred; they were just two people watching the night, their children asleep inside.

"How's Will holding up?" he dared to ask, bringing himself back to reality.

"He'll be okay. It was so hard, but..." Joyce paused and took a deep breath. "He's back and he's safe. Hopefully for good this time."

Hopper could only nod. How much her family had gone through in the past year was beyond him. He lost his daughter once, for good, but Joyce lost her son twice, and doesn't know if she'll lose him again. Which was more torturous?

"What about El?"

Jim had a hard time answering; he didn't know. Eleven had been able to speak one word since he carried her out of the lab-*Will?*-and she was too weak to even walk. The girl was asleep now, but how long would she stay asleep? Would the Mind Flayer now haunt her dreams now just as the Demogorgon once had?

"She's tough." Hopper said after a while, taking a pull on his ever dwindling cigarette. "So is Will. They're gonna be okay."

He wanted to ask Joyce how *she* was holding up, but knew this wasn't the right time. Bob had died less than twelve hours ago; how she was handling that was not something to be discussed at the moment. Instead, Jim wrapped an arm around Joyce's shoulders momentarily. "They're gonna be okay."

Back inside, Eleven continued to wake for brief moments at a time, but upon seeing her friends, made an effort to stay conscious. The first thing she saw when she fully opened her eyes was Mike's freckled face staring down at her. A second later, Dustin and Lucas were, too.

"Hey Eleven," Dustin spoke first, and when he smiled, El was momentarily surprised at the sight of his front teeth again; she wondered if she'd ever get used to it.

"How're you feeling?" Mike asked, his voice soft and quiet.

Eleven took a moment before answering. Speaking took so much strength, as did thinking of the right words, but more than anything she wanted to talk to her friends. "Tired," she said weakly. A small smile peeked at the corners of her mouth. "Happy."

"Me too," Dustin, Lucas and Mike said in unison, grinning at each other.

"Wow, El," Lucas said, his eyes landing on her drying head. "I guess I never...thought you'd have hair."

Eleven smiled at this too, remembering her own shock when it was finally allowed to grow.

"It's kind of like mine!" Dustin said, and felt a twinge of joy at the thought of having something in common with his very unique friend.

Max was seated on the floor behind them, wanting desperately to talk to the girl she'd heard so much about but not wanting to overwhelm her or cause any more animosity between them. She was still hurt that El had brushed her off without a second thought, but since Dustin and Lucas had assured her over and over that Eleven wasn't a big fan of words or new people, Max tried not to take it personally,

though couldn't help feel that it was. Lucas noted her absence and scooted back to sit beside her. Max reached out to take his hand, smiling sheepishly.

This act was not lost on Eleven, who immediately spotted both Lucas' blush and Dustin's faint expression of hurt—he looked the same way she'd felt when she saw Mike and Max in the gym. She glanced again at Lucas and Max's intertwined hands, then down at her own, which was held tightly in Mike's. When she'd first seen Max, El was heartbroken at the thought of Mike and her friends replacing her. Then when she saw Max *again* surrounded by all of *her* friends, her place in the party felt threatened once more. This new girl had long hair, she knew lots of words, and she had that board with wheels on it; Eleven didn't have any of those things. But upon seeing that Mike was more than overjoyed at her return, as were Dustin and Lucas, El realized that she'd made some kind of mistake regarding the girl with hair like fire.

"Max?" El asked, clarifying her name.

Max's wide eyes met hers, confused but hopeful with a slight smile. "Eleven?"

The tired girl nodded and weakly outstretched a hand. Max shook very lightly, as the other girl's grip was limp and unsure; she got the impression that El hadn't shaken many hands. "Thanks for saving our asses."

El gave her a tiny smile, and Max felt a weight lift off her shoulders. If she'd finally gotten on Mike's good side, maybe getting on Eleven's wouldn't be impossible.

"Max saved our asses too, and Steve's!" Dustin told El. From the opposing couch, Steve grunted. "It was so badass, this guy was wailing on Steve and Max stabbed him with a syringe, and then put that spiked bat between his balls!" Dustin pointed to the weapon leaning on the wall beside the front door.

There was so much in that sentence that Eleven didn't understand. "His balls?"

Mike paled beside her, looking to his friends for help. Nancy suppressed a snort and Steve laughed out loud, as did Dustin, turning El's attention towards a person she hadn't noticed until now. Mike saw his opportunity for distraction and took it.

"El, this is Steve. He helped us too."

"Hurt," Eleven observed, her eyebrows pulling together in worry.

"You should see the other guy," Steve replied, voice garbled.

"Yeah, what the hell happened to Billy anyway?" Nancy asked.

Max's face curled in disgust, an expression El took immediate note of. She had no idea who Billy was, but quickly got the impression that nobody liked him. "I don't care where he is as long as its not here."

Mike turned back to Eleven, noting her exhaustion. "El, are you hungry or thirsty or something?"

Eleven's lips pulled back in disgust at the thought of food, but her throat was parched. "Water," she said softly.

Mike returned quickly with a full glass, which the grateful girl took small sips off, still fighting off nausea. With her thirst slackened, Eleven leaned back against the couch, pulling the blanket close to her shoulders and sighing deeply. She was so, so tired, but so incredibly happy to be reunited with her friends, her first family. El wanted to spend as much time with them as possible, but she was fading fast. The girl took Mike's hand again and smiled wearily up at him. He gazed back, still in awe that this was really happening. Just before Hopper and Joyce returned inside, Eleven fell into the deepest and most satisfying sleep she'd ever had.

She crashed on the couch, Mike slumped next to her, their fingers intertwined all night. The rest of the party was spread out on the floor, Max's head in Lucas' lap and Dustin feet pressed against Steve's side, who failed at fighting off sleep. Nancy retreated to Jonathan's room shortly after Steve assured her he'd be fine, and Joyce drifted in and out of consciousness next to her son. Hopper, however, didn't catch a single wink that night, instead choosing to keep watch over

the house and its occupants, alternating between chain smoking outside, waking Steve every few hours to make sure he wasn't dead, and sitting against the couch beside Eleven, watching her sleep. Contrary to average, the girl didn't move the entire night; Jim was used to finding her pillows on the ground and her blankets tangled around her legs when he came to wake her up in the mornings, but she was still as a statue and her breathing remained deep and even.

It wasn't until the sun began to rise that light allowed Hopper to notice Eleven's pink flushed cheeks. Upon inspection, he found her forehead hot to the touch, and goosebumps rose up on her skin at the contact. Jim tried to rationalize that the level of physical and mental exhaustion she'd put herself through the night before could most certainly warrant her fever, but the child's rising body temperature and abnormal sleeping pattern was still concerning. In an attempt to bring her temperature down, Hopper removed the girl's blankets and placed a damp, cool cloth on her forehead. He'd expected her to protest, but Eleven was a deep sleeper, and while she shivered, she remained asleep as Jim blotted her face with the washcloth, leaning into his warm touch when he brushed her hair aside. Will was actually the first one to wake up, promptly followed out by Joyce when they emerged from her bedroom. The woman was surprised to find Hopper wide awake in the living room, and confused as to why he was fussing over the sleeping girl.

"Everything alright, Hop?" she asked hesitantly.

Jim startled, he hadn't heard them come in. Joyce looked like she hadn't slept in thirty years, and Will's eyes had dark purple bags underneath them. Hopper couldn't imagine he looked much better, and glancing down at El, she didn't either; her skin was white as a ghost, the veins in her face still on prominent display, and it looked to Jim like she'd lost a few pounds. Jesus, did Becky not feed her or something? Maybe *that's* why the kid came back, food was a big deal breaker for Eleven. "She's got a fever."

A wave of worry rocked Joyce momentarily, and she stepped forward to more closely observe. The child was breathing heavily and rather loudly, though she didn't know if that was unusual for her or not. Despite the cold cloth, Eleven's cheeks maintained a rosy complexion that was far too vibrant to be normal. When Joyce reached to feel her

forehead, her cold fingers made the little girl flinch away slightly, turning into Jim and moaning softly. She was definitely very warm, but not totally on fire, not enough to warrant significant concern. "I think she's okay, Hopper. We'll just keep an eye on her."

Jim nodded solemnly, biting the inside of his cheek. Silently, Will stepped forward to stand beside his mother and the Chief, staring, for the first time in their dimension, at the girl his friends had raved about for the last year. She looked *strikingly* different; Will wouldn't have recognized her as the same person who found him in the Upside Down last year, but he hardly remembered seeing her anyway. He knew she had a shaved head, as vividly described by his friends—Lucas and Dustin conjuring up an image of someone otherworldly, while Mike painted a picture of a gentle girl almost fondly. The vision in his mind was that of a wild, supernatural savior who'd come to his rescue bathed in a soft yellow light. But curled up on their couch next to Hopper with unkempt curly hair and *his* pajamas, she looked more like a young child rather than the powerful telekinetic he'd heard of. Was this sick, sleeping kid really the same one who'd saved everybody twice?

"She looks...different than I remember." Will observed quietly.

Joyce slung an arm around her son, a sudden realization washing over her. "You never really met her, did you, honey?"

Will shook his head. "Only in the Upside Down."

"She asked about you last night," Hopper said. "It was the first thing she said when she woke up."

Will almost blushed at that. This was the girl—who he'd never even officially met—that saved him from certain death on more than one occasion. What would she think of him when they *actually* met? What if she didn't like him? Will heard the night before from Dustin and Lucas that Eleven had completely ignored Max's attempt at friendship, and he desperately hoped to win her favor.

It was as if El could sense Will was there; maybe she could. The girl let out a weak groan and pushed away the washcloth Jim was pressing against her cheek, reaching up to rub her tired eyes. They

fluttered open, landing on a very concerned Hopper, then on a slightly smiling Joyce, and finally to Will, who stared back in shock. At first, Eleven thought she might be dreaming, the sight of the boy she'd fought so hard to save happy and awake was very overwhelming and confusing. The child blinked hard a few times, finally gazing back at Will with equal intensity.

"Hi, Eleven." The boy offered with a smile.

"Will." The girl returned, relief washing over her. Joyce told her last night that he was okay, but the sheer sight of seeing him upright and smiling and speaking was still a shock.

"How do you feel, honey?" The woman asked, brushing a curl across Eleven's toasty forehead. Her half lidded eyes were glazed over with fever, and she was still breathing heavily despite having woken up.

The child thought for a minute, unsure of her answer. She'd never been so tired before, but couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so well. All of her friends were there and safe, and even though her body felt like it was made of rocks and her thoughts were a little foggy, Hopper was right there holding her hand, and El couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this content.

"Tired," she answered honestly, her statement from the night before still ringing true. "Happy."

"How're you, kid?" Jim asked Will, giving him a pointed look.

The boy leaned into Joyce's side and she wrapped her arms tightly around her son. "Better." Hopper only nodded in response, knowing not to push further.

Their conversation woke Dustin first, who sat up and yawned, stretching. His arm whacked Lucas in the face on the way down, who startled awake quickly, still on guard from the night before. Apparently so was Max, because she bolted up as soon as Lucas snapped at Dustin over the accidental whack. Watching all of this unfold, Hopper was surprised that Wheeler was still asleep beside Eleven, but as soon as the thought came into his head, Mike was shaking the sleep out of his hair and smiling at the girl sitting beside

him.

"Oh shit," Dustin said, breaking the silence. "Steve fell asleep!"

"He's alright, I've been keeping an eye on him." Jim said, easing the kids worry. Come to think of it, how the hell had Harrington even ended up in this mess? *Whatever*, he thought before his attention was quickly turned to the little girl tugging on his shirt.

"Hopper," she said, her voice sounding like gravel. It wasn't a question, she needed something. He could see it in her eyes.

"What's up, Kid?" He replied, raising a hand to her warm cheek and brushing the pad of his thumb across her skin. The gesture was nice; Eleven leaned into his comforting touch.

"Help." She answered quietly, and before Hopper could worry, said, "Bathroom."

Without another word, El was scooped off the couch and into his arms. Upon arrival, the girl tiredly reached for the empty space beside the sink where she thought she'd find her toothbrush, slightly disoriented and disappointed when her fingers found only air; it was then she remembered she wasn't at home.

Jim chuckled at this, silently proud that her first impulse after waking was to brush her teeth. He tried to think of something that would help get the probably terrible taste out of her mouth. "How about I get you something to eat?" El shook her head tiredly. "Water, then?" She nodded, and Hopper slowly began to shut the door, stopping when there was a crack left. The child didn't protest, so he made his way into the kitchen. Dustin and Max were in there already, knees on the counter and scavenging through the cupboards.

"Joyce know you're in here?" Hopper asked them, loud enough to be overheard in the other room. Did nobody teach these kids manners? Come to think of it, though, Jim was sure if El had been feeling better she'd be right up there with them. He had no room to talk when his kid still ate with her mouth open.

"Yeah," both replied in unison. Dustin spoke again. "We're getting

bowls for cereal."

Hopper grunted, momentarily considering making some for Eleven. She didn't like cereal that much though, she preferred it dry if at all. Joyce didn't have any Eggos-he'd looked for some last night in case the girl woke up hungry-and the closest thing was toast. She'd turned down food, but Hopper knew El needed to eat something after all the energy she'd spent last night. It wasn't characteristic of her in the slightest to lose her appetite, and with the addition of a fever, Jim was determined to get her strength up. He threw two slices of bread into the toaster, and when he saw the bathroom door open and the little girl leaning against the wall out of breath, quickly went to help Eleven back to the couch where Mike was eagerly waiting to greet her. Jim returned moments later with the water and toast, one of which the child made a face at.

"Just a couple bites, El." Hopper said plopping next to her on the couch and ruffling her hair.

"Don't feel good." she replied, eyes still bloodshot. Mike glanced at Jim, mirroring his own expression when she said this. The boy knew as well as anyone that El loved to eat, and her abnormal behavior worried him, too.

"I know, Kid, but you'll feel better. When was the last time you ate, anyway?"

The child shrugged, unable to remember. She'd eaten the sandwich that Aunt Becky made her, but that was almost-what was it, almost *three* days ago! El recalled eating something when she was with Kali but she couldn't remember what it was, only that she wished it'd been the Eggo's she'd forgotten at the gas station.

"Yeah, exactly. Here." Jim pushed the toast further into her lap and El sighed before picking up a piece with shaky hands. She took a tiny bite, then another, then dropped it onto the plate before leaning back into Mike. Hopper rolled his eyes but didn't push it; after all, he had told her only a *couple* bites, and he didn't want to make the kid sick to her stomach.

Even after everyone else had eaten their own sugary breakfasts-Joyce

was apparently intending to fatten up her sons with the candy cereal she bought them-Hopper was unable to persuade El to eat anything else, and she fell asleep against Mike shortly after everyone finished breakfast. One by one, the party began to trickle out of the Byers' home, Lucas offering to drop Max off and Steve proposing the same to Dustin. They each woke El as they left, and she would mutter a faint goodbye before falling back asleep. It wasn't until Nancy demanded for the third time that Mike get off the couch and out the door, that Jonathan was driving them home, that the girl fully woke.

"Okay, okay!" Mike said, moving El into a sitting position. She rubbed her eyes and yawned, slightly disoriented after just waking. Mike's voice reeled her back to reality. "I have to go, Nancy's waiting. But..when can I see you again?"

The girl opened her mouth to reply, to tell him that he could see her tomorrow, or even later today, when Jim stepped in and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'll let you know, kid."

Mike eyed the man suspiciously. "Oh yeah? When?"

Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose, already more than annoyed. "Dammit, Wheeler, trust me on this, alright? With everything that happened last night, not only are people gonna be crawling around the Lab and Hawkins, but she's exhausted. Give her some time to get her strength back."

"I don't care if she's even awake, I just want to see her!" Mike said, struggling to keep his voice quiet. "You kept us apart for a year!"

"Mike," Nancy said, equally as exasperated. She'd called home saying they were on their way back over twenty minutes ago, and by the tone of their mother's voice on the phone, they were likely already on thin ice.

"Hopper," El's small voice filtered through the rising chaos, but Jim still caught it. She was gazing up at him with huge, pleading eyes. "I want to see Mike," her raspy voice said. "More than soon."

Jim threw his head back and bit his cheeks, feeling both equally frustrated and guilty. He turned to Mike. "We can negotiate semantics

tomorrow, but right now you better get home before your sister drags you there." he motioned to Nancy, who was standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips.

"Mike," El said, gathering everyone's attention again. "We have a radio."

At this, the boy seemed to brighten a little bit. He glanced to Hopper. "We can still talk, then?"

Jim nodded. "Just don't say her name."

Mike turned back to El, still seated on the couch beside him. "Maybe we can talk tonight, then?"

The girl smiled. "Normal time?"

Mike smiled too, remembering that she'd heard him talk to her every day for the past year. "Yeah, sounds good." he leaned forward and pressed her into a tight hug, and El began to lean in for a kiss before Mike turned and stood, intending to avoid the affection in front of others. This puzzled the girl, who didn't understand why it might be awkward at all.

She watched them go from her spot on the couch, Will bidding his goodbyes as well before taking a seat next to her, remote in hand. He turned to face the girl, still slightly intimidated, though it was strange to feel uneasy around an exhausted little kid wrapped in a throw blanket, especially when she smiled at him after he sat down. "Wanna watch TV?"

El nodded in response, turning to face the box across the room. It was much bigger than the one they had in the cabin, and had way more channels to watch. The girl suddenly felt a familiar pang of longing for something she wished she had.

Noting the kids' comfortability on the couch, Hopper and Joyce found their way into the kitchen to share a cup of coffee and another cigarette. Jim was hoping he'd get away with *contemplation* as well, but Joyce needed to keep something off her mind, and she had about a million questions regarding the child he'd been hiding for the last

year.

10. Chapter 10

"When did you find her?"

Hopper sighed, glancing into the living room at the kids. He wasn't sure what direction their conversation was headed in, and he wasn't sure he wanted El to overhear. Fortunately, she looked a few minutes away from sleep beside Will. "About a week after Thanksgiving, David Johnson came down to the station and told me he'd been knocked unconscious by a little boy in a dress he found while he was hunting."

"She was out in the woods?"

The man nodded. "She told me later she'd been hiding there since that night, that she walked back to Mike's but it wasn't safe."

"How the hell did she survive? After everything and then...being out there all alone?" Joyce wondered aloud.

"Johnson said he found her cooking something over a fire, and the next thing he knew he woke up without his jacket and hat."

Joyce had to stifle a smile; she knew it was inappropriate, but couldn't help imagining grumpy old Mr. Johnson getting knocked unconscious by a telekinetic little girl. "How'd she learn to start a fire?"

"That was my question too," Hopper said, joining her with a weak smile. "She couldn't even tie her shoes when I found her, so how'd she learn to cook her own food?"

"This was a week after Thanksgiving?" Joyce asked. Hopper nodded. "We'd already had the first snow storm by then! When did you actually get her?"

"After Johnson talked to me, I started leaving food in a box for her. On New Year's morning, she followed me to my car."

"Jesus," Joyce said. El had been out there all alone in the cold for over a month, with only her mind and a stolen jacket and hat to offer

any protection.

"She was so small." Jim muttered in remembrance. "And she'd been wearing the same damn clothes that whole time."

"And you took her to the cabin?"

"Yeah." Hopper smiled this time. "She'd never seen a bed so big. Or listened to music."

"Poor thing." The woman said sadly, finishing the last of her coffee. She noticed that his mug was empty too, and she stood to refill it. "Speaking of the cabin, you two haven't been living there all this time with boarded up windows, right?"

Hopper cracked a small smile, exhaling smoke from his nose. "Nah, that happened the day after Halloween. We got in a fight."

Joyce glanced into the living room where El was asleep on the couch next Will, who was alternating between watching TV and doodling. "She broke the windows?"

"And speaking of *that*," Jim said, putting out the mostly dead cigarette. "It's almost below freezing outside today, and if El has a fever, I don't know if being at the cabin is the best place for her. I can fix the windows myself, but it'll take a few days. Do you..." his words started to falter. "Could El stay here?"

"Of course, Hop. Of course." Joyce said. "Anytime."

"I'm thinking if I get all the supplies today, I can be finished sometime tomorrow." he said, clearing his throat and straightening his back. "Thank you, I really appreciate it."

"You're going now?"

He shrugged. "What else am I going to do?"

"You should rest, Hop. You were up all night."

"Oh yeah?" he eyed the woman critically. "And you weren't?"

"Well," she started in defense.

"I'll try to catch some z's on your couch tonight, okay?" Hopper conceded, standing up. "You call me on the radio if anything happens."

He glanced to the kids, both of whom were now asleep. He debated on waking El to tell her he was leaving but decided against it, resolving that she might just sleep the entire time he was gone anyway. After tipping his hat to Joyce, he was gone, and the woman was left with only the background noise of cartoons to keep her company. She peeked in on Jonathan in his room, where he was still asleep. It stuck her suddenly that she had absolutely no idea where her older son had been while her and Will were at the Lab. How had he known to find them there? Where had he gone? Somewhere with Nancy Wheeler, presumably, though her boyfriend Steve still managed to make a pretty radical appearance. What the hell had happened to him? She didn't know and supposed it didn't matter now. Resigned to her fate of utter exhaustion, Joyce plopped back down at the kitchen table and lit another cigarette for herself.

Will woke up in the late afternoon to find that he'd fallen asleep sitting up on the couch. El was still out against his side, beads of sweat dripping off her curly hair and soaking into the shoulder of his shirt. He squeezed out from underneath her, surprised she didn't wake up when he moved, and found his mom asleep at the kitchen table. From the bathroom, he could hear his brother humming in the shower, and figured he'd wait until Jonathan came out to wake Joyce. He changed his clothes and was making himself a sandwich when Jonathan stepped into the kitchen.

"Hey. Did you just get up?" he asked Will, sitting in the chair beside Joyce as he began to rub her back.

"Yeah. I don't know how long Mom's been there." he replied as he cut the crust from his sandwich and sat at the table with them.

Joyce lifted her head from the table tiredly, the world spinning a bit. She didn't remember falling asleep and wasn't sure where she was until she heard her oldest son speak to her in a tone so soft that she was suddenly so grateful; her boys might not be big tough guys, but

they were genuinely good, through and through.

"Mom? Are you alright?" Will asked.

"Yeah, I'm...I'm fine." she said, rubbing her eyes. "I guess I fell asleep."

"When did Hopper leave?" Jonathan said, noting his absence.

"Hopper left?" Will asked, glancing at El on the couch.

Joyce rubbed her forehead with one hand and searched her pockets for a lighter with the other, lighting a crinkled cigarette. "He's fixing the windows at the cabin." A light went on in her head and she was suddenly wide awake. "Where's Eleven?"

"She's still on the couch." Will said, devouring the last of his sandwich.

Joyce made a mental note to remember that he'd eaten and glanced at the clock; almost five. Hopper had left nearly four hours before. El needed to wake up. Joyce put out her short lived cigarette and treaded softly to the couch, sitting beside the girl and trying to wake her as gently as her son had woken her. The girl was practically just a lump underneath a pile of blankets, only the top of her sweaty head was visible. The woman pulled back some of the covers, and El immediately whined in protest, shivering. The pajamas she'd borrowed were cold and stained with sweat, and the child's cheeks were flocked in red splotches.

"Hey, sweetheart," Joyce said, rubbing her back. "Can you try and wake up for me?"

It wasn't until Joyce helped her sit up that she opened her eyes, and when she did manage to peel them open were bloodshot. "Hopper?" El croaked, blinking hard.

"He's fixing the windows at your cabin, but I'm sure he'll be back soon." Joyce told her, feeling her clammy forehead first with her hand, then her cheek, a motion so practiced it was unconscious. "How do you feel sweetheart? You're pretty warm."

"Bad." El replied, brushing a wet strand of hair from her face with the

back of her hand.

"Do you want to clean up and change clothes? It might make you feel better." The woman suggested.

El's head spun just comprehending the question; she was worried if she tried to move she'd pass out. Her body hurt and felt so heavy, but sweat was tickling her hair and neck, and she'd been in the same spot on Joyce's couch all day. The girl nodded, her head feeling like it was going to roll off of her neck and into her lap. Joyce helped her stand, steadying her when she started to sway. El was almost as tall as her now, but thankfully still thin enough that Joyce could bear most of her weight as she helped the child down the hall and into the bathroom. Joyce started the shower and left El leaning against the sink, returning a moment later with another pair of Will's pajamas and a towel.

Joyce felt the falling water with her palm, nodding in satisfaction at the temperature. "Alright, it's not too warm because you've got a fever, but you don't have to stay in for long. Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

El managed another nod. "Okay."

Joyce smiled and left the door cracked.

Ten minutes later, the girl was wrapped in a blanket and seated at the kitchen table, the tips of her still drying hair dripping into her lap. The shower had woken her up enough to give her somewhat of an appetite, something Joyce quickly took advantage of. She felt bad that she didn't have any Eggos for her, but resolved to tell Hopper to bring some with him when he returned. The woman used this as a bargain of sorts with El, persuading her to eat soup first with the hopeful promise of waffles later. El ate slowly, her hands trembling with each spoonful, but eventually it brought some color back to her pale complexion. The child finished half of it before Joyce let her lay back down on the couch, Will beside her and the television on again. The sun was setting when she dragged her son's Supercom out from under a pile of dirty clothes and radioed Jim.

"Hop, are you there?" She asked a few times.

"I'm here. Everything alright?" came his crinkled response.

"Yeah, the kids just ate."

"I'll head over soon. Need anything?"

"Eggos."

She could practically hear him smile. "Got it."

El's eyes were getting heavy again when Jim pulled up at the Byers' house, but held a sparkle the man wasn't accustomed to upon his return, and she actually rose off of the couch to hug him when he arrived.

"Hey, Kid. I brought you Eggos." he said, kissing the top of her head. She was wearing a different pair of Will's pajamas now, and Jim regretted not bringing her clothes of her own. El's arms squeezed him tighter, and he could feel the warmth of her skin through her clothes. "Go sit down and I'll get you one, okay?"

She complied, and Hopper met Joyce in the kitchen with a weary smile, quickly popping waffles into the toaster. The woman retrieved a plate for him and passed him her cigarette.

"Thanks," Jim said gratefully. "First one I've had since I left, I forgot my pack here, in my jacket pocket."

"Take it, I feel like I've been at it all day." Joyce replied.

Smoke circled the pair. "How was she?" Hopper asked.

"She slept most of the day, I woke her up around three because she was all sweaty."

"Yeah I could tell she was running a fever. What did she eat earlier?"

"A little soup and some water." Joyce replied.

Hopper grunted in acknowledgement. "How's Will?"

"Just been tired. Jonathan, too."

"And you?"

Joyce took a breath and held it, unsure of how to answer. It was the first time anyone had asked directly about her own well being; she hadn't even given herself time to process the storm of emotions that rumbled through her, instead had busied herself with two unwell kids, taking an inadvertent nap at the kitchen table, and chain smoking a pack of cigarettes that was almost empty. Before either of them could say anything, the toaster popped, startling them both.

Hopper blew smoke from his nose quickly, kicking himself for the question he'd asked. "I got everything I needed today for the windows and fixed two of them, I should be able to get the rest done by tomorrow afternoon." he said, busying himself with putting El's plate together.

"That's fine, I can watch her until then." Joyce said, silently thankful for the interruption. She knew Hopper meant well; she just wasn't ready.

"Thanks, Joyce." Hopper replied with a weak smile before retreating to the living room.

After finishing just one of her Eggos, El felt significantly better. Maybe it was because it was the first waffle she'd had in days, or because she was squeezed in between Joyce and Hopper on a couch that smelled like something she couldn't place but was comforting nonetheless. Will sat on the end of the couch beside his mother, feeling oddly at home with two people who certainly didn't live with him. Jonathan had been in his room for most of the day, which wasn't unusual, especially considering the events of the previous few days. Every time she thought of her oldest son, though, Joyce felt the sudden urge to burst into his room and demand to know where he'd been while she and Will were at the Lab and how he knew to find them there. She stopped herself though, with the reminder that maybe she-again-just wasn't ready to know.

An eight o' clock show had just rolled its credits when El remembered, very suddenly, that she had an obligation. "Mike!" she said, springing forward on the couch, the first time she'd sat up voluntarily all day.

"What?" Both adults asked.

"We have to talk." she said, turning to Will. "Your radio."

"It's in my room, c'mon." the boy said as he stood, gesturing El to follow him. She had the forethought to stand up slowly and smile at Hopper encouragingly before trailing Will into his room.

"And welcome to the next phase of her life." Joyce said jokingly, nudging the man when he sighed heavily and reached for his own pack of cigarettes.

"Kill me now." he said, lighting up.

The woman just laughed. "What did you expect, keeping them apart for a year?"

"It wasn't like I was doing it to torture her. They would've killed Mike to get to her and you know it." Hopper replied seriously. "I thought I was protecting them both. I didn't realize how much either of them were..." he cut himself off, remembering their tearful reunion the day before. He'd known then and there that he was wrong about keeping them apart so strictly.

"I'm not saying it was right, Hop, but I understand. Is that why she blew out the windows?"

The man nodded. "She left that day to see him but I guess he didn't see her, I don't know. I didn't get the full story."

"Because you were yelling?"

He finally smiled dryly. "How'd you guess?"

Joyce laughed again. "You're the Chief of police, Hop. When you get scared, you get mad. I've seen it."

"Yeah, well I shouldn't have," he said, passing her the cigarette. "She told me I was like Brenner and that she hated me, then I left the next day and everything happened with Will and I didn't come back."

"So does she...dress like that when she's mad at you?"

Jim shook his head. "I didn't get her those clothes, she left to see Terry."

The woman's eyes went as wide as saucers. "She saw *Terry*?" Hopper could only nod. "How the hell did she find out about her? How did she get there?"

Hopper finally laughed. "Same thing I asked. She told me, 'a truck',"

"A truck?" Joyce clarified.

The man's voice went small and quiet, his eyes widening for effect. "A big truck."

"Who drove her in a big truck?"

"A man." he said, still imitating Eleven. "A *nice* man."

"Jesus, she could've been killed!" Joyce said, still not finding the humor in the situation.

"Nah, she'd've squeezed his brain to a pulp if he'd tried anything." he replied, taking a puff. "I guess it's nice that I don't have to worry about her safety like that."

"But she saw Terry? What else did she say?" Joyce pressed.

"Nothing, we didn't get that far. Guess I still have to do some damage control."

"I wonder what Terry's sister thought. Probably about pissed her pants."

"I thought Becky was the one who gave her the clothes and the makeover, but now I don't think so."

Joyce waited a moment before daring to ask the next question. "You think she went somewhere else?"

Hopper put out the cigarette angrily, trying to hide his shaking hands. "I don't know."

Back in Will's room, he and El positioned themselves on the floor against his bed. He passed her the Supercomm and was about to explain how to use it when she beat him to it, turning in to the right channel and everything.

"Mike?" she called, her voice still on the edge of desperate.

He answered immediately, as if he'd been waiting for her call since he'd left. "El!"

The girl was forced to close her eyes for a moment, suddenly overcome with emotion. She'd waited nearly a year to be able to speak to him on the radio, just as long as he'd been waiting for her to finally reach out.

"I'm here." she said, moisture clouding her eyes. "I'm here, Mike."

From across town in a basement inside a cramped pillow fort, Mike blinked back tears of his own. "Me too."

11. Chapter 11

Nearly an hour later, Will emerged from his bedroom alone, the door still cracked halfway. He rejoined his mother and Hopper on the couch, one of whom immediately asked where his kid was.

"They're still talking, I got bored." he said, turning up the volume on the television that Joyce and Hopper weren't paying attention to.

Jim reached over and ruffled Will's hair affectionately, raising an eyebrow at Joyce. "I like this kid, he can see El anytime."

By ten, Will and Joyce were asleep on the couch and Hopper could no longer hear El's small voice from down the hall. He helped Joyce and Will to bed, her bed, before he checked in on his own. Eleven was asleep on the floor, the Supercomm still tight in her grasp. After lifting her into Will's bed and tucking her tight, Hopper was unable to contain his smile when he saw the tiny grin on her lips; it was the first time he could remember that she'd fallen asleep happy.

Joyce's unmemorable yet terrifying dreams woke her sometime in the middle of the night, but thankfully not Will, and she was able to extract herself from her son without waking him up. She got a drink of water checked in on Jonathan, who was nothing but a pile under the covers, but neglected to see that Eleven was asleep in Will's room. She expected to find Hopper and the girl together on the couch, but was surprised to see only the man, snoring loudly and, for the first time in days, fast asleep. Before she could worry too much about El's location, she heard a weak moan echo through the quiet house. She pushed open Will's cracked door and found the little girl curled tightly in on herself, and she could hear her crying.

"Oh, sweetheart," she said, sitting gently on the bed beside her.

The woman wondered suddenly how often this happened; she remembered Hopper asking Owens constant questions about how to help Will with his nightmares, more insistent upon solving that problem than Joyce had been. It all made sense, suddenly, why the man had clung to the doctors every piece of advise regarding sleep, why his own eyes always seemed to have bags underneath them. She

realized then that El had suffered through the same Hell that her son had throughout the last year, and felt tears prickle at the edges of her eyes. Joyce had done her own grieving over Eleven after the events of last November, despite the fact she'd only known her for a day. She'd saved her son's life, and underneath the shaved head and hard, determined face, she was just a little girl; a little girl who'd never been shown an ounce of care, never had a real home, never had a mother. Joyce often dreamt of somehow finding her again, of bringing her home and feeding her, holding her, loving her. Since she'd comforted her in the middle school gym almost a year beforehand, she'd thought of Eleven every day.

The woman's chest tightened again when she heard El choke on something between a sob and a desperate, heartbreaking plea. A whispered beg of, "Mama."

Joyce couldn't bear it. She slid underneath the covers next to the child, spooning her in the same arms Will had fallen asleep in just hours ago. She'd expected El to flinch at the contact, her son usually did when she woke him from a bad dream, but instead she felt the girl take a deep, shuddering breath in before rolling over to face her, wrapping her thin arms around Joyce's neck and burrowing her face into her chest, sniffing and whimpering. The woman held her tightly and kissed her cheek, her forehead, her bouncy curls that smelled like their shampoo.

"Baby, baby," she crooned softly, rubbing up and down Eleven's back underneath her pajama shirt. Her soft skin was still hot, but thankfully not feverish anymore, just warm with distress. "It's alright, just go back to sleep. Shhh."

Joyce held her as her whimpers died down to just deep breaths, El squeezing her tighter every time she moved. The woman wondered how Hopper usually got her back to sleep after a nightmare. Her method apparently worked for both Will and Eleven, because eventually the girl's grip on Joyce lessened, and tears stopped squeezing their way out of her eyes. But even when she was sure the child was asleep deeply and calmly again, the woman did not slowly slide out from beside her or tuck her in, but instead held her as grip on the girl the same, knowing that all the love she could give her would never be enough to replace how much she'd been deprived of.

Hopper woke before dawn, still running off of adrenaline. He was startled at first; Joyce's ceiling was unfamiliar, and he jumped to his feet faster than he thought he could before he remembered where he was. He sat again with a sigh, instinctively reaching for a cigarette, though he hadn't needed one first thing in the morning since last January when he found El. Jim decided on coffee instead, brewing a cup as quietly as he possibly could. He felt more like himself again when he was finished, and looked around the house for a task to complete before he realized that the majority of the windows at the cabin were still shattered. He still had to fix the front door too; he had no idea how it'd been blown completely off its hinges, but at least that repair was simple. The man sighed and glanced at his watch; almost four am. The sun would be up soon, and the faster he got to the cabin, the faster he could finish and bring El home and finally, *finally* take a breath free of anxiety. He left a note on the kitchen table and peeked in on everyone first, and finding Eleven wrapped in Joyce's arms made his heart pinch in the best way before he was gone again.

With nothing but work to do and no distractions, Hopper made quick time, and Joyce was just crawling out of Will's bed and leaving behind a sleeping Eleven when the man finished putting in the last window. Both of her boys were up already, the oldest making breakfast and the youngest watching cartoons. She checked in with Will about his night before kissing his forehead and giving Jonathan a side hug in the kitchen.

"You sleep okay?" she asked, sitting down at the table.

"Mm hmm. Did Will?" Jonathan said.

"He said he did. El's asleep in his room."

"Oh yeah, Hopper left a note." her son said, passing a slip of paper to her.

Went to the cabin, be back before noon. Call if you need.

-Hop

Joyce felt momentarily bad for not noticing his absence. What time

had he even left?

"When did you get up?" she asked her son.

"Less than an hour ago." Jonathan replied, passing her a plate of bacon and eggs and taking one to Will in the living room. "There's some for El when she wakes up, too." he said when he returned, taking a seat next to his mother.

They ate in silence for a few minutes before Joyce couldn't contain herself any longer. "So...you and Nancy?"

Jonathan choked on his eggs momentarily, coughing to regain his composure. "I...I don't know."

"Sure seemed like it the other night."

Her son was quickly turning into a tomato. "That was...I don't know, okay?"

Joyce just smiled and touched his hand from across the table. "I always liked her."

Soon after they finished breakfast, Hopper's police blazer rolled up in their gravel driveway. He knocked twice quietly before letting himself in; he still found it odd that after everything, Joyce never locked her doors. Maybe it was because she knew he was coming back.

"Done already?" Joyce asked when he stepped inside, shedding his coat.

"Yeah, I left early. How's everything?"

"Good, El's still sleeping." she replied. "Do you want her breakfast? She probably won't eat it."

Hopper almost declined, but the rumbling in his stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten yet. "Sure, thanks."

Jonathan joined Will on the couch while Joyce made herself and Hopper a pot of coffee. He took the cup from her graciously after

nearly inhaling his meal, and they sipped together for a while in silence before, typical to her nature, Joyce broke it.

"How early did you leave this morning? I didn't hear you."

"About dawn. I saw you with El before I left."

Joyce smiled, remembering the previous night. "I heard her crying for Terry when I woke up."

Jim ran a heavy hand over his face, feeling the urge to reach for a cigarette again. "Guess those'll be her new nightmares."

"I get why you were always asking Owens about that now."

"Nothing he suggested helped anyway. What did you do last night? Did she wake up?"

"Not really," Joyce said, her hands wrapping around her warm mug. "She went back to sleep pretty easily after I laid down with her."

"That's usually what works."

It was quiet for a moment before she broke it again. "I was thinking, I know it's probably not safe for her to be out much yet, but maybe I could see her on my days off? Stay with her while you're at work."

Hopper looked slightly taken aback. "I mean, if you want to, of course. I'm sure she'd love it."

"I really would." she said, glancing into the living room at Jonathan and Will. "I always wanted a little girl, if Lonnie hadn't been such an asshole."

Hopper smiled at the woman wryly. "Well, maybe it's not too late."

The next thing she knew, Eleven was forcing open tired eyes as she felt herself being lifted into the air. Her view over Hopper's shoulder was blurry and disjointed; she blinked a few times, and Joyce's image came into focus. A moment later, there was a hand caressing her face comfortingly. It was still well before noon, but to the home's still exhausted occupants, time didn't feel real. She rubbed her eyes, Will's

bedroom coming into focus. She must have fallen asleep after talking to Mike.

"We'll see you soon, sweetheart." Joyce said as they walked through the hallway, opening the front door for the pair as they left. Beside her, Will smiled and waved goodbye.

Eleven returned the wave and half of the smile before Hopper whisked her outside and into the car. She was still dressed in Will's pajamas and wrapped in a blanket from his bed when Jim started the blazer and drove off in the direction of the cabin. They didn't speak, but midway through the drive, El grabbed Jim's hand, and he squeezed it back. The first thing she did when they arrived at the cabin was brush her teeth, a task she'd once considered mundane but that she'd wound up missing in its absence. Hopper was rifling through the fridge when Eleven sat heavily at the table, still exhausted despite having slept all night and most of the day before.

"What can I do, Kid? You hungry?" Jim asked, running a hand through his hair.

She shook her head, resting it in her arms that were leaning on the table.

"El, you gotta eat something. I know you don't feel good, but you'll feel better with anything in your stomach.."

The girl looked away from him, closing her eyes. The last thing she wanted to do was eat; just the thought of chewing and swallowing anything sickened her. Something to drink, however, didn't sound terrible.

"Water." she said, her voice raspy.

"Food too, Kid. All you've had is water."

She frowned and buried her face in her arms, trying to rub away the fatigue. Maybe if she stayed there long enough he wouldn't make her eat.

Jim sighed in defeat, not wanting to fight with the kid over something like this after everything. "You can have an Eggo."

He'd expected her head to shoot up, but as a testament to her utter exhaustion, El could only manage to slowly raise her eyes to meet his, doubt shrouded within them. Eggos were for dessert-she knew the rules.

"But you have to eat more than two bites, okay?" Hopper said, eyeing her pointedly. El managed a nod of compliance as he stood to prepare her meager meal.

She only managed half before her stomach felt full enough to burst, and Jim decided not to push it in fear of making the girl sick to her stomach. She did finish the glass of water, however, and was rubbing hard at her eyes again when Hopper guided her into the bedroom. Eleven practically collapsed into the covers, and Jim tucked them tight around her, sitting down in the chair beside her bed. The child stared at him for a moment, then reached for his hand again. Hopper took hers in both of his, looking down at the girl with a weary smile. Even though he knew she was just drained, it pained Jim to see Eleven like this, so weak and exhausted, just as Sara had been towards the end. He swallowed the lump in his throat and squeezed El's hand lightly.

"Hopper?" the girl said, eyes glazed over with a lingering fever.

"What's up, Kid?"

She took a moment before beginning. "You didn't lie."

Jim was confused. "What do you mean?"

"You said Mama was gone." she answered slowly, weakly. "Only half lying."

Hopper looked down at their hands, ashamed. "I'm sorry, El." Sorry for the half lie, sorry for her mother's condition, sorry for the life that was stolen from her before she even knew it existed. "About all of it."

Tears pooled in the child's eyes. "Mama won't get better." Jim sat on the bed and held her then, silent tears streaming down her rosy cheeks. It was bittersweet; Eleven was mourning the loss of her mother even though she wasn't *really* gone, but Hopper holding her

made it feel like everything would be okay because he was there, just like he was there at the Gate, just like he had been through every nightmare. If Mama couldn't be there, Hopper could, and maybe that was just as good.

"I love you, Kid." Jim said into her curls. Eleven felt the words vibrate through his chest as he spoke them, and she knew they were magical even without fully comprehending all of them.

"Love?" she sniffled against his chest, wiping her eyes. The girl had heard the word before on television, but didn't understand why the concept seemed to hold so much weight.

Jim pulled back, still holding her at an arm's length. It broke his heart to have to explain this to her; she'd never grown up knowing what it was as she should have. "Love is an emotion, like happy and sad and mad, they're all things you feel." Hopper started. "Love can be romantic between two people, with...um.." he cleared his throat awkwardly. "...kissing, and other stuff. It can also be between a parent and child, in different ways though. But when you love someone, you would do anything to make them happy. You care about them as much as yourself, maybe even more."

"Between..parent and child?"

"Yes, like," Hopper sighed, musing how to best explain. "Joyce is Will's parent. She helps him learn and grow, teaches him stuff, and would do anything to protect him. That's what parents are supposed to do." He almost winced at this, realizing again that she'd never known it.

"Parents teach?" The girl asked. Hopper nodded, unsure of what she was confused about. She looked up at him then, big eyes boring into his. "You teach."

Jim nodded again, an odd sensation rising in his stomach. What was she getting at? Eleven severed their eye contact when she quietly dared to ask her next question. "Are you...my parent?"

Hopper cleared his throat, running his hands up and down the child's arms; she was still practically sitting in his lap. His stomach was in a

knot and he could barely breathe. "Only if you want me to be." Jim managed, raising her chin and gently forcing her to meet his gaze when answering this question.

Tears filled El's eyes again, and was able to choke out a "yes" before throwing herself at Hopper as he pulled her into a tight hug. Jim blinked tears from his eyes and marveled at the little girl in his arms. He would cherish this moment forever.

Soon, though, curiosity got the best of Eleven, and she retreated from the hug to ask another burning question. "Parents are Mama and...Hopper?"

At first, Jim didn't understand what she was getting at. It wasn't until she repeated herself that he registered the confusion in her tone regarding his name.

"You can still call me Hopper, or something else. Whatever you want, Kid."

The girl's brow furrowed and she looked up at him again. "Not Papa."

Hopper squeezed her hands. "Not if you don't want to."

Eleven thought for a minute more, then seemed to brighten with the arrival of an idea. "Maybe...Hoppa?"

Jim stifled a laugh, but couldn't suppress his grin. "Is that what you want to call me?" The child nodded enthusiastically, and he pulled her to his chest once more. "Okay, Hoppa it is."

When she was asleep, Jim slowly disentangled himself from Eleven's grasp, tucking her carefully into bed. When he pressed a soft kiss to her temple, her eyes briefly fluttered open. "Hoppa?"

"Yeah?"

A small smile tickled her lips. "I love, too."

After downing a beer and two cigarettes, he switched on the fixed TV and sat on the couch with a sigh, and the first rush of relaxation he'd felt in days washed over him suddenly. El was home, safe and asleep

in bed, and the fate of the world wasn't at stake. He drifted in and out of a light sleep until mid afternoon when the temperature started dropping. Jim changed into sweats and switched a space heater on, bringing it into El's room, checking her forehead again and finding it still toasty warm. Hopper didn't expect the girl to stir at his touch; she sometimes didn't even wake when he picked her up. Instead, her eyes began fluttering and she reached desperately for Jim's shirt.

"No," she muttered, tossing and turning. It didn't seem like she was having a nightmare, it was almost as if she was arguing with someone.

Hopper tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, taking her hand. "You're okay, Kid, just go back to sleep."

El kicked suddenly, grabbing Hopper tighter. "Please," her voice was quiet, but scared and desperate. "No, don't call." Not arguing now, but pleading, begging.

"Call who?"

"No!" she nearly shouted, grasping his hand so hard that he could feel his fingers turning white. "I want ...please."

Hopper was confused. Eleven didn't talk in her sleep aside from screaming single phrases, so this behavior was new. He didn't want to keep her awake, so he didn't respond verbally, instead just sat beside her and rubbed her arms until she stopped rolling her head against the pillow. When she was still he attempted to stand, but again El snagged him by the shirt, this time her unconscious plea hitching off into a sob. "No, please! I'm sorry!"

He sat down again, this time more concerned. "What's goin on, Kid, what're you talking about?"

El curled into him as he sat, holding tightly to his shirt. "I want..." her eyebrows pulled together and she shivered suddenly, pulling closer and squeezing her eyes shut. Hopper wrapped a blanket over her and placed a hand on her back.

"What do you want, El, you gotta tell me." Jim tried gently, rubbing

up and down atop the quilt.

"Stay here."

He sighed. Jim didn't want her back in the habit of only falling asleep with him in the room, but considering the circumstances, he relented.

"I'm right here, I'm not going anywhere."

"Don't call." The girl mumbled into the sheets wrapped around her.

"Don't call who?"

Eleven curled further in on herself, becoming as small as possible.

"Papa."

Hopper's heart clenched, and he held her face in one of his hands as he rubbed her back with the other. She wasn't awake, but wasn't totally asleep either. "He's gone, El, he's not gonna get to you."

"I'm sorry." she nearly whispered, a tear peeking out of her fluttering eyelid.

"What're you sorry for, huh? Nothing's wrong, I promise." the man tried to reassure her.

El's next words came out rushed, nearly begging now. "Don't take me back!"

Take me back? What the hell was she talking about? Jim was about to question her again when suddenly his own angry words from only a few nights before echoed in his head.

Fine, you wanna go back in the Lab? One phone call and I can make that happen.

Guilt stabbed him in the stomach as he realized what she was referencing. He'd apologized to her in the car the day before-or maybe early that morning-but should've known that what he said to the child would probably sting for a while. El had every reason to be afraid that he'd send her back; he'd directly threatened it. Hopper blinked back tears as he lifted the girl into his arms. She wrapped hers around his shoulders quickly, instinctively, and burrowed her

face into his neck. Her skin was still warm, but not bad enough for him to have to force medicine down her throat. Jim held her tight as her breaths began to even out, then spoke to her in a tone so soft and quiet that Eleven could barely feel the vibration of his voice..

"I'm so sorry El, I was just scared and angry, and I didn't mean that. I would *never* send you back there, I should not have said that to you. That was wrong for me to do, Kid, and I'm sorry. I love you, and I want you to stay here with me." Jim said, feeling his throat begin to close at the end. The last thing he wanted was for the child to walk around him on eggshells with some invisible force lurking between them, and this issue had that exact potential. How often had Eleven felt unwanted and unloved in her life, and Hopper could hardly bear the fact that she trusted him with her safety and he broke it with one sentence. He'd have to rebuild their bond again, and he only hoped she could forgive him.

"I want to stay here," El said into his neck, barely audible.

"You never have to go back to the Lab again. I would never make you, I promise."

Right then, Jim felt her breathing slow, along with her heart rate. El's eyes stopped fluttering and remained shut, her twitching fingers seizing movement. Her final request into Hopper's shoulder was a whisper that probably wouldn't have been heard had El not been as close as she was to his ear. "Promise?"

Jim held her tight, this time taking his words as seriously as his daughter did. "I promise."

12. Chapter 12

Joyce watched her son climb the steps to school, his first day back since the incident; the newest one, at least. She was hesitant to let him go, but Will had insisted, complaining that he missed his friends and teachers. So, begrudgingly, she let him, but it didn't stop Joyce from worrying the moment he was out of her sight. After a few minutes of idling in the parking lot, someone behind her honked, and she sighed, turning on the ignition and heading for the one person in Hawkins who could distract her. But Hopper wasn't at the police station when she arrived, and Flo at the front desk said he'd called in sick for the past three days. Could the chief of police do that? Apparently, and there could only be one explanation.

The woman took all the back roads she knew on the way to his cabin, and parked next to Jim's blazer before starting her walk, keeping the tripwire in mind. Joyce wished Hopper had a phone so she could warn them she was coming, God knows they would probably be scared shitless by a knock on the door. When she arrived at the cabin, she tried a different approach in hopes of not sending its occupants into a state of panic. She took heavy, exaggerated steps onto the front porch, and placed her palm on the door with a light tap.

"Hop, can you hear me? It's Joyce."

She heard footsteps behind the door, then what must have been fifty locks opened and Jim was standing in his sweatpants and a T-shirt looking both exhausted and surprised.

"Joyce? What's wrong, what're you doing here?" His eyes were bloodshot and had dark circles beneath them.

Joyce peered briefly inside and saw no trace of El, though this didn't shock her. "Nothing, I just.." she smiled sheepishly, feeling silly for coming all the way out here and scaring Hopper like she did. "It's Will's first day back at school since, you know, and I don't work Wednesday's, so I just needed some company."

Jim smiled in understanding and opened the door wider to welcome her inside. Joyce gratefully stepped forward, and Hopper locked the

door and led her to sit on the couch, stopping briefly to check on the still sleeping little girl behind the almost closed bedroom door.

"She sleeps in." Joyce stated simply when Jim sat beside her. She *wished* Will slept in, at least on weekends, but the early Saturday morning cartoons still routinely woke her up.

Hopper laughed, catching the woman off guard. He quickly regained his composure. "Not usually. She had a rough night, she's sleeping it off."

"Rough night?" Joyce was familiar with them, her own son had been suffering from the same affliction for almost a year now. But Eleven's version of a rough night was probably drastically different from Will's-the circles beneath Hopper's eyes said so-and she wondered what hers entailed.

Jim rubbed the back of his neck a little too hard, and was about to answer when he heard a moan from behind the bedroom door. He smiled at Joyce tiredly. "Lots of this."

Eleven was on her side when Hopper entered the bedroom, the sheets tangled around her legs and one arm hanging off the bed. Her eyes were trying to open, but Jim knew that after the events of the previous night she needed to rest for a while longer. Hopper gently lifted the half conscious girl into his arms, the only way he'd been able to get her to sleep for the past few days. Jim held Eleven tight against his chest until her breathing evened out again, but when he attempted to lay the girl back down she clung to him with a whine.

Hopper didn't want to fight her on it, the last three nights had been absolute hell filled with fits of panic whenever he was out of her sight. The last thing Jim wanted was to hear Eleven cry again, or for Joyce to experience what happened when the child's' emotions got out of control. So instead, he flung a stray blanket over the sleeping girl and sat heavily on the couch with Eleven tucked against his chest.

"Yeah, it's been tough." Jim told Joyce, letting out a deep sigh that caused El to snuggle further into him.

"I didn't know she was so...clingy." That wasn't the word she'd wanted to use, but Joyce couldn't think of a better one to describe the child's behavior.

"It's kind of a, uh, recent development."

"Since the Gate?"

Jim absentmindedly rubbed up and down El's back, nodding. "She hasn't slept the same since, has nightmares every night again, and sticks to me like glue all the sudden but won't tell me what's wrong. I don't know what to do."

Joyce smiled sadly and sighed. "I think what you're doing right now is the best thing for her."

This made Jim hug the girl even closer. "I know she's not a baby, but.." was he holding back tears? "I can't stand to see her so upset. And how can I can leave her like this?"

"Hey, you're doing the right thing, Hop." Joyce reached over and touched his knee, and the man smiled wearily. "This is the first time I've let Will out of mine or Jonathan's sight since...everything. I understand how you feel, and El's a different really think anyone in that lab ever held her or rocked her to sleep? Just because she didn't get this as a baby doesn't mean she doesn't need it now. "

"That would've been nice to hear the last few nights." Jim said wistfully. "Where the hell have you been?"

"I was probably up with Will at the same time you were up with El." Joyce replied in the same manner.

"He having nightmares too?"

"Its getting better. I don't know if it'll ever go away though, for any of us."

Hopper grunted. "Think the other kids have them? Bad dreams?"

"I know Jonathan does." Joyce said. "Not like Will, but I've heard him and woken him up a few times in the last year."

"Man, I can't believe he lets you!" Hopper laughed. The girl against his chest squeezed him tighter, startled by the change in movement. He ran a hand through her hair and she relaxed into him again, pressing her ear to Jim's chest to hear his heartbeat. Immediately, she stilled.

"Me either," Joyce answered. "I've been preparing for them to drift away from me, but neither of them have. I mean, Will wants space around his friends, but at home when it's dark, we're always together. He's slept with me since that night."

Jim only nodded, hugging the child a little closer. He supposed it would be alright if El followed in their footsteps, though he did enjoy having his already tiny bed to himself.

"So, you told Flo you were sick?" Joyce asked after a long silence. Hopper sighed, motioning to the little girl asleep in his lap. "But Hop, you're the Chief of police."

"I tried that one this morning. She held the front door shut."

Joyce pressed her palms together, musing. "I could stay with her, but I need to pick up Will at three."

It's not like it hadn't occurred to Jim to ask Joyce to watch Eleven, but the thought of burdening the woman any more than she already was left a bad taste in his mouth. "I don't know, Joyce. El's been...a handful."

She nearly snorted. "Oh please, Hop, she barely speaks!"

But that was just the trouble. Without the words to express the vast range of emotions she was feeling lately, El had been given to tantrums and sudden fits of crying over the last few days. Upon discovering she was out of Eggos one evening, the girl had telekinetically thrown the empty box across the room and slammed the refrigerator door shut so hard that it fell forward and everything spilled out of it, causing Eleven to sob out rushed apologies in fear that Hopper would be mad at her. The next morning she'd burst into sudden, scared tears again when Jim attempted to leave for work the first time. She clung to his side and refused to let go, screaming when

he tried to untangle himself and holding the locks on the door firmly in their place. Hopper was dumbfounded; the behavior had come completely out of nowhere, and he'd never seen Eleven act that way before, not even in the beginning. It was like they'd taken two steps back, that she was an even wilder version of the little girl who came out of the woods last year, now refusing to be away from him for even a second. As much as he knew he needed to get back to work and get the damn kid on a normal schedule again, Hopper couldn't put his foot down, not when El was so emotionally unstable. How could he say no to the little girl who'd just saved all of their asses *again*, especially when all she wanted was him? He couldn't.

Joyce could see he was battling something. "Hop, come on. You have to go to work."

"I know, it's just," Jim sighed again, unable to come up with a reasonable rebuttal. Joyce was right, he knew she was. Hopper couldn't afford to keep skipping work, especially given his position *and* after all he'd missed in the last year. He'd have to go back at some point, whether El liked it or not, and Joyce was the best person to leave her with; the child had responded well to her before, and the woman was aware and understanding of both her abilities and social ineptitudes. Hopper knew Joyce would give her life to keep El out of harm's way- or any of the kids for that matter- and he scratched his beard, finally conceding. "Maybe a swing shift, catch up on some paperwork. I could be back by ten?"

Joyce looked puzzled. "Why don't you just go in now and come back before I have to get Will?"

Hopper considered this briefly, but ultimately declined. "I already told Flo I felt like shit this morning, and El will freak out if I leave while she's asleep. I'll tell her when she wakes up so she has time to get used to the idea and is prepared when you come."

"So I'll watch her here after I get Will from school?"

Jim nodded. "I don't know if your place is safe yet. Not until everyone's out of that lab."

"I understand." the woman promised.

Hopper smiled wearily. "I'll make sure she's got something for dinner."

"Don't worry about it, I'm sure we can put something together. Might be fun."

"You don't have to do that, Joyce." Jim started.

"It's okay, she can help me cook."

Hopper's mind flashed to one of the last times Eleven 'helped' him cook. They made macaroni and cheese, but the impatient little girl was far too hungry to wait around for the noodles to cook thoroughly, resulting in crunchy pasta. Remembering El's poor table manners as well, Jim mentally prepared himself for Joyce's later lecture. "Yeah, I'm sure you guys will have a great time."

Joyce smiled smugly. "We *will*. I'm excited to watch her."

Hopper pressed his lips to the child's head, smelled her lavender scented curls. "Hopefully she doesn't put up too much of a fight when I leave. She likes you, though, so maybe it'll be alright."

"What does she like to do? I can bring board games or cards or something. Get her distracted" The woman offered.

"She'd like that, she's good at speed and rummy. She might be entertained enough just spending time with you, though. Watch a movie or something."

Joyce hadn't thought about it until then, but she'd never really been around El unless there was a crisis. Sure she spent two days at her house after the gate-a mere three days ago-but the girl was either sleeping or sick for most of it. "I'm excited to see what she's like."

"She's quiet. She's better than last year, but sometimes I still feel like I'm talking to myself." Hopper said, readjusting El's head so that her exhales stopped whistling. "Who knows, maybe she'll talk to you more."

Joyce just smiled, noting Hopper's darkening under eye circles. She stood from the couch and checked her pockets to make sure she had

her keys. "I'll let you two sleep and see you later, then."

Hopper almost interjected, wanted to be polite and tell her she could stay, but it wasn't in him. He was exhausted down to his core and wanted nothing more than to just go to sleep, so instead he only nodded and stood as well, no longer needing to be cautious of waking El; she was *finally*-dead weight in his arms.

"Thanks for doin' this, Joyce. I really appreciate it."

"Don't worry about it." she smiled. "See you after three."

Jim locked the door behind her and carried El back to bed. Flopping into his own, Hopper closed his eyes, determined to sleep as much as the child would let him. He got a good four hours, and it wasn't until after noon that Eleven woke up, though when she did she was fiercely hungry. Hopper sat with her while she devoured toast and an apple, thinking about the best way to break the news to her. Joyce would be back in three hours, so he had plenty of time to get the kid used to the idea that he was leaving.

Clearing his throat, Jim spoke. "El, I have to go to work. I know you don't want to be alone, so Joyce is going to come stay with you while I go down to the station."

A droplet of apple juice ran down the child's chin. Cheeks full, she responded with a garbled but firm, "No."

Shit. "She'll be here around three. You can have dinner and watch a movie, play board games, read, whatever you want. And I'll wake you up when I get home later tonight, I promise."

"*Wake me up?*" she asked incredulously, still chewing. "No bedtime?"

It touched Hopper deeply that the little girl didn't want to miss their nightly routines, but he knew he had to stand his ground. "Tonight, Joyce will stay with you for bedtime."

Confusion, shock, and hurt flashed across her expression. Why didn't he want to be with her? "No!"

Jim took a deep breath, trying to maintain his own composure. She

only wanted him there, how could he be mad at her for that, especially after all she'd been through? "No what, Kid?" he prompted, encouraging the girl to articulate her emotions rather than physically act on them. It was tough; after years of being praised and rewarded for using her powers on any occasion, remembering not to was a difficult task, especially when El got upset.

"I...I want," Eleven started, tears coming to her eyes. The towel hanging above the sink was ripped off its nail, falling to the floor, and the child's fork shot across the table and barely missed Hopper.

"Hey, calm down." the man said in a warning tone while reminding himself that getting angry at the girl only made matters worse. If the past few days had taught Hopper anything, it was that Eleven's emotions and abilities went hand in hand; if her mood was unpredictable, so was her telekinesis. "El," Jim took her hand from across the table, steadying her shaking fingers. "Take a deep breath and find your words. You don't have to hurry."

"I...I want *you*." the child finally said, tears streaming down both cheeks. "Please don't go."

Hopper got up and hugged her then, bending to her height beside the chair. "I have to go to work, El. I promise you won't be alone and I'll wake you up as soon as I get home. That's the way it's gonna be today, I'm sorry. I don't want to leave either, don't you think I'd rather stay here with you?" the girl shrugged, and Jim hugged her again. "Of course I wish I could, but I just can't today. I'm doin' my best, kiddo? You won't be alone and I won't be gone long."

Even though her chin wobbled, she nodded in sorrowful understanding. At least if Hopper was gone, Joyce would be there with her. "Halfway happy." she muttered. Hopper smiled and hugged her once more before letting her finish her meal.

The rest of their time together was spent playing cards and listening to music on the couch, El dozing off during the latter. She woke to Jim shaking her awake, and when she sat, he moved to open the door.

"Will?" Eleven said as the boy walked in. She rubbed her eyes, unsure

if he was really there.

"Hi, El." the boy replied with a smile.

The girl slowly pulled herself off the couch and went to embrace him. Seeing Will awake and healthy was still odd; she had to physically feel that the boy was safe and sound.

"You're staying?" El asked, eyes wide and hopeful. Will nodded enthusiastically as a smile spread across the girl's face.

"I brought some stuff to draw with." Will said, revealing a backpack Eleven hadn't noticed before. He pulled out endless sheets of paper and crayons-which she recognized-but also colored pencils and markers, which she'd never seen before.

The girl smiled, really smiled, revealing all of her teeth. "Want to see my room?" Will nodded and she took his hand, leading him proudly inside.

"See?" Joyce said, nudging Jim in the side when the kids flopped onto Eleven's bed, markers in hand. "She'll be fine, we'll have fun."

"You can get ahold of me with the radio," Hopper replied, pointing to the machine. "If anything happens, just.."

"Hey," the woman interrupted him, touching his shoulder gently. "I know exactly how you feel, but I really think everything will be okay."

Hopper only nodded, biting the inside of his cheek. Despite the woman's reassurances, he was still worried something would go wrong, that Eleven wouldn't be alright without him. Of course this wasn't true, she'd been left alone on so many occasions, yet this time felt different. Jim didn't doubt that El was the strongest person he'd ever known, but right now she seemed so fragile. Hopper pushed his worries aside, swallowing them as far as he could. "Thanks Joyce, I really owe you one."

She smiled wearily. "No, not after everything. Don't worry about it."

Jim nodded again, still trying to choke down his anxiety. He gathered

his hat and jacket, then, taking a deep breath, strode to the bedroom, immediately taking note of the kids sprawled out on the bed. Will's expression was neutral, carefully drawing something Hopper didn't yet recognize. Eleven was beside him coloring in his previous markings, concentration etched into her soft features.

"Hey Kid, I'm gonna go to work. I'll see you later, okay?" he said, trying his hardest to sound cheerful.

It was as if she'd forgotten he was leaving; Eleven's face dropped and she scurried off the bed, pressing herself tight to his chest. Jim hugged her back fiercely, wanting just as much as the little girl to stay home. He bent down and spoke softly in her ear. "Hey, we talked about this, yeah? I promise I'll wake you up when I get home. They'll be here with you the whole time."

Tears glistened in the child's eyes. "Promise?"

Hopper squeezed her tighter. "I promise."

"What time?"

Jim sighed, knowing this question was coming. "Before midnight, and I *will* wake you up."

After a moment, he felt a defeated nod against his chest. With regret, Eleven pulled back slowly and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, nodding to herself with assurance. Jim stood as the girl returned to a stack of Will's markers, blinking hard a few times as she plucked off a cap and continued. Before she could change her mind, Hopper quietly exited and met Joyce at the front door where she handed him his keys.

"Let's talk outside for a second." Hopper said, tapping the pocket he always kept his cigarettes in. Joyce couldn't turn the offer down-sharing a smoke was their tradition. She followed the man out onto the porch, leaned against the railing as he flicked open a lighter. Hopper passed the stick to Joyce, who eyed him pointedly after taking it.

"If she really wants to stay up and wait for me she can, you don't

have to put her to bed." Jim started, trying to think of anything else noteworthy to mention regarding Eleven. "She always takes a bath after dinner. If she does decide to go to bed, she might ask you to read to her first. Sometimes she'll fall asleep that way, but if she doesn't, cover the lamp with a blanket so it's dim and make sure the window is cracked, she likes the fresh air. I have to sit by her bed and hold her hand until she falls asleep. She used to fall asleep on her own, but since the Gate its been..." Hopper started to trail off, but Joyce only nodded along in understanding, so he continued. "And again, she might put up a fight about going to sleep, so you don't have to make her But if she does, remind her to go to the bathroom before she falls asleep, sometimes she wets the bed."

Joyce only nodded, not really surprised. Jonathan had the same issue well into middle school, and he hadn't been through nearly as much trauma as El. "How often does that happen?"

"Sometimes when she has nightmares," Hopper replied, technically telling the truth. She'd *only* had nightmares recently. His mind flashed to the last time El wet the bed, the first afternoon they came back to the cabin after the Gate. Though she actually hadn't had a nightmare on that occasion, she was still running a fever and was so exhausted that she hadn't even woken up when it happened. Jim didn't know how long she'd been wet when he checked in on her and found the child shivering in cold, soaked bedding and pajamas. It was hard for him to see her like that, especially after the immense display of power she'd so recently shown. How was it that she could go from something practically supernatural to a small, sick little girl so quickly? Eleven was horribly embarrassed because she'd gone all summer and fall without an accident; Hopper was just grateful that it hadn't happened at Joyce's the day before. "Or if she's really tired or not feeling well. But you *can't* tell her I told you, she'd be mortified if anyone knew."

"Jonathan wet the bed until he hit puberty." Joyce spilled. "But you can't tell him I told you."

"Maybe you should tell El, might make her feel better."

"Then Jonathan would be mortified."

They both smiled sheepishly, the woman still separating the important information from Hopper's nervous and repeated rambling. El wants a bath and a book before bed, needs to use the bathroom, dim her light, and hold her hand until she's out. *Easy Peasy*. Something stabbed her heart when she heard Bob's voice saying that in her head. She couldn't break down now, not right here.

"Don't worry about us, Hop, I'll call you if anything goes wrong, but it won't." she urged, distracting herself. Jim thanked her again before Joyce retreated inside, the locks clicking shut behind her. As Jim began the trudge to his car, he hoped with every fiber of his being that El would be okay.

Back inside, Joyce checked in on the kids, who were still drawing and coloring in the bedroom. It wasn't quite four, so with time to kill, she sat on the couch and flipped through some of the magazines and newspapers on the coffee table for a while. Growing tired of tabloids, Joyce clicked on the TV, but Hopper only had five channels and none of them were playing anything even remotely interesting. Switching it off, the woman gazed around the cabin in search of something to do. Was this how Eleven felt all the time? No wonder she didn't want Hopper to leave, he was the only source of entertainment she had at all, *and* the only human interaction. How the hell did Jim keep her like this for almost a year? Joyce was surprised the girl had lasted that long.

Beside the couch, Joyce spotted a basket of clothes, and upon inspection, found them clean but not folded, so she set to work. All of Hopper's clothes were what she'd expected to find-jeans, T-shirts, flannels. El's however, were slightly surprising. It looked as if Jim had gone to a resale store and bought every miscellaneous item he thought might fit her. Some of them looked way too big; she wasn't sure if they were his or hers until she began spotting blood stains on the occasional sleeve. With an armful of laundry, she headed into the bedroom to put it away, checking in on the kids again.

"Hey mom, look at this one!" Will said when she entered, pointing to a sunset that El was coloring a deep shade of pink.

"I love it, you two, it looks great!" Joyce replied, heading to the dresser. Inside the drawers, the remainder of the child's clothes were

scattered in balled up piles; apparently they didn't normally fold laundry around here. When she finished, she turned around to find the girl staring intently up at her.

"I'm hungry." she said.

"You're hungry? It's a little early," Joyce answered, glancing at the time. Not quite five. She didn't know when El usually ate and didn't want her to be hungry again later. "We could play a board game?"

The child shrugged, indifferent now after hearing she had to wait.

"Have you ever played monopoly, El?" Will asked. She shook her head.

"Maybe not Monopoly, honey." Joyce told her son. *Something easier, something she'll actually be able to understand.* "What about Candy Land?"

"Boring." Eleven and Will replied in unison, smiling at their coincidence. *Okay, I guess Candy Land is too easy.*

"I don't know what other board games we have." Joyce said, quickly running out of ideas.

Will hadn't, and his mouth shot up into a quick smile. "Oh, I know! Hide and Seek!"

"That's not a board game, sweetheart." the woman answered.

"No," Will said. "But it's a game. Have you ever played Hide and Seek, El?" The girl shook her head. "It's so much fun! One person counts while everyone else hides around the house so the person who's looking for them has to look really hard. If they find you first, you have to count next time."

Eleven thought for a minute, still confused. "Hiding? Like...you?"

Now it was Will's turn to be confused. "What do you mean?"

"In the Upside Down." She replied simply, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Where else had he hidden?

Will's eyes went wide and Joyce's breath caught in her throat. While mother and son had talked about his time stuck in a different dimension often, they'd never talked about it with Eleven. Joyce wasn't sure if it was hard for her like it was for Will to think about that time in their lives, but she appeared casual over it. Will was caught off guard by El's question, but realized that she was actually right, Hide and Seek was like hiding in the Upside Down. The boy nodded, diving into an explanation. "Yeah, kind of. The goal is to not let the monster find you, but instead of a monster it would be my mom."

Joyce smirked at her son. "Why do I have to be 'it' first?"

Will rolled his eyes. "Cause I have to show her how to play!"

The woman conceded, allowing her son to thoroughly explain the game to Eleven, who, by the end, knew exactly what to do. Joyce agreed to count to forty, and Will dragged the girl behind him in search of a good hiding place. Will had always loved to play Hide and Seek, a skill that would later come in very handy for him. After the Upside Down, Joyce was surprised when she came to pick up Will from Mike's house while they were in the middle of a game. She supposed she thought that hiding would only remind her son of his time running from that monster. Quite the opposite, actually. The only reason he survived at all was because he hid, so it made Will feel very safe. He was always the last one found when he and his friends played, and often they gave up and asked him to just come out.

Will led Eleven into her bedroom, where he quickly scanned it for a good hiding place. The space under her bed was big enough for both of them to fit under, and Will figured they could hide together the first time since she'd never played before. He layed flat on his stomach and slid through the crack, motioning for El to follow him. She only crouched, carefully examining Will's hiding spot. She'd never really looked under her own bed before; it was dark, dusty, and cramped down there. She knew there was enough room for her to fit next to him, but she wasn't sure she wanted to.

"Come on, El, she's almost at twenty." Will whispered, motioning for the girl to join him. Why wasn't she hiding? Did he not explain the

game well enough? Eleven shook her head in response, her eyebrows pulling together. Will was confused. "You don't want to play?"

El shook her head again, frustrated now that he didn't understand. "I do."

"Then come hide!" he whispered urgently. Joyce had just reached thirty. El only had ten more seconds.

"Not here." she replied, almost fearfully. Eleven didn't need to whisper, her speaking voice was quiet enough already.

Will thought for a moment, unsure of what to do but knowing he had to do something because for some reason Eleven was afraid. He poked his head out and scanned the room again for a different spot. There wasn't much time to find another good alternative, but they had to hide somewhere. Quickly, Will crawled out from under the bed and took El's hand again, this time leading her to stand behind the open bedroom door just as Joyce's voice rang out, "Ready or not, here I come!"

The kids were still as statues as she searched the house, entering Eleven's room last. It'd been a while since she'd played hide and seek, and it didn't even occur to Joyce to check behind the door. As she entered the bedroom and walked right past them, Will felt fingers grab his arm. He turned, worried she might be scared again, but El was grinning from ear to ear and watching the woman's every move, anticipating the moment they'd be found. When Joyce finally spotted them, both kids erupted in giggles. Will offered to count the second time around, and even though Joyce attempted to get El to hide on her own, she refused to.

"I want to stay with you." the child said shyly, gazing up at Joyce with wide eyes. She couldn't say no to the little girl and wondered how Hopper ever did. They hid together in the bathtub, out of sight thanks to the shower curtain. However, Will was an old pro, and he found them immediately. Eleven was the only one who hadn't been 'it' yet, though it took some convincing to get her to do it.

"What if I can't find you?" she'd asked worriedly.

"You will, Honey. There aren't that many places to hide." Joyce had assured her. She'd glanced at her son then, giving him a look that meant *pick an easy spot*.

El finally agreed, counting to forty as the others had, and surprised herself when she quickly found Joyce hiding behind her bedroom curtains, and then Will underneath Hopper's bed. When they'd each counted a third time, Joyce called the game off to start dinner. Her son was disappointed, but Eleven only smiled at the promise of food; though Hide and Seek was fun, she'd been waiting to eat for what felt like forever. Joyce didn't know if El was picky or not, but Will was terrible, so she'd brought over supplies to make something she hoped everybody would like-spaghetti. Not sure of the girl's cooking skills either, the woman put Will in charge of boiling water while El helped her make the pasta sauce. More than once she caught the girl licking crushed tomatoes off her fingers, but only smiled at her childish behavior. She was, after all, still a child, just a somewhat older one who'd probably been years late on most milestones.

One thing Joyce didn't anticipate, however, was how messy of an eater Eleven was. To the girl's credit, she did use her fork, but slurped the noodles with such intensity that Will was sure he'd be hearing the sound for the rest of his life. By the time they were finished-El cleaning her plate first-her face was splattered with tomato sauce. Fingers covered with the same substance, Joyce watched with wide eyes as Eleven wiped her filthy hands on her jeans, staining the pant legs bright red. Remembering Hopper mentioning that she always took a bath after dinner, Joyce wondered if the activity was actually her own choice or if it was done at Jim's request. The question was answered when El stood from the table without word and strode into the bathroom. Joyce quickly spotted that Eleven hadn't closed the sliding accordion door, but the girl apparently didn't think twice about it because she started the bath water and immediately undressed, climbing in. As the woman made to close the door, however, El stood up in the bathtub and glared at her malevolently. It wasn't until Joyce realized she was unable to move that she understood what was happening. The only experience she'd had with Eleven's abilities was when the girl found her son in a kiddie pool and when she'd flung an interdimensional dog through her front window. Joyce knew she was capable of telekinesis, but was still

surprised nonetheless.

"What's wrong, El?" the woman asked when she was able to move properly again.

"Don't close it." Eleven said, still standing in the tub. "Please."

"Well honey, it's..." she stopped when she noted the girl's expression; she was terrified. The last thing Joyce wanted was for Hopper to come home to a scared kid after he'd been so hesitant to leave her anyway. She couldn't let the girl bathe completely out in the open, but the woman supposed she didn't have to be totally hidden either. "How about we just close it halfway, yeah?" Eleven watched closely as Joyce slowly slid the door partly shut, leaving a crack large enough for the child to see out of, but not enough for them to see in. "Is this good?"

El had a sudden flash of memory. She was back in Mike's basement, soaked in the huge T-shirt hanging off her shoulders, thunder rumbling in the distance. She'd been much more scared then. *How about we keep the door just like this?* Mike asked, making sure she felt comfortable, safe. Nobody had ever done that for her before. It would be the first bubble of trust she ever felt welling for the boy, and definitely not the last. *Is that okay?*

"Yes." The girl echoed aloud, nodding in affirmance.

"Do you have a towel, sweetheart?" Joyce asked, snapping El back into reality. She glanced around the bathroom and shook her head. Hopper usually brought one in for her, along with pajamas. "Okay, I'll be right back."

The woman quickly retrieved one for her. "Do you need help with anything?" She was unsure if the girl could wash herself properly considering she could barely eat properly. The child shook her head in response before bobbing under the surface, bath water spilling onto the floor. Holding in a sigh, the woman retrieved a second towel in anticipation for another mess before returning to the main room.

While Eleven bathed, Will turned on the TV and found a station that was playing a movie neither he or Joyce had seen before, so she sat

with him to watch. When they heard the bathtub begin to drain followed by footsteps, both Will and Joyce turned around and spotted El walking into her bedroom in search of pajamas, towel wrapped snugly around her waist. Will immediately whipped back around, eyes wide on the TV and his cheeks bright red. As much as it embarrassed her son, Joyce had to suppress a laugh at the style El had obviously picked up from Hopper.

Dressing herself in one of Jim's oversized T-shirts and pulling a blanket from her bed around her shoulders, Eleven plopped onto the couch between Will and Joyce. Minutes later when the woman turned to ask both kids if they wanted dessert, she found Will's head on the armrest of the couch, eyes beginning to flutter closed, and El was already asleep against his side. Glancing at the clock, Joyce was surprised to find that was only just after eight. Thinking further, she realized that even though her son had mostly recovered from his recent incident, this had been his first day back at school since then. He'd seemed happy when she picked him up and assured her that he'd had a good day, but the woman remembered spotting circles under his eyes. And from what she'd observed earlier that day, Eleven was still gaining her strength back as well, and being up half the night with horrid dreams probably didn't help. As she watched the children, Joyce smiled to herself for a few reasons, but mostly that she'd proven Hopper wrong.

While the kids slept, Joyce cleaned the dishes, leaving the TV on in fear that if she turned it off the spell would be broken. With time still to kill, she properly folded and put away all of Eleven's clothes in her dresser, made her bed, packed up Will's art supplies, and was about to slump into the rocking chair when she spotted a box under Hopper's bed labeled 'Hawkins Lab'. Curious, she slid the cardboard out and quietly opened the lid, finding the thing full of files, most containing endless reports on experiment number 011. Upon closer inspection, she found that many of the files were dedicated to each year of her life, from birth to age-ironically-eleven. Joyce glanced back at El, still fast asleep against her son's side. Deciding she didn't want to risk the girl waking up to see her snooping, Joyce heaved the box into her arms and stepped onto the porch, a pack of cigarettes in her coat pocket. She was pleased to find a chair beneath the kitchen window, so Joyce sat down, propped a cigarette between her fingers,

and began with the file entailing Eleven's first year of life. She never ended up smoking.

13. Chapter 13

The pictures accompanying the reports that documented her growth were startling to say the least. The only thing Joyce knew about El's birth was that it had been covered up as a miscarriage and somehow Dr. Brenner had kidnapped her. She had no idea that the girl had been born almost two months early and didn't even weigh four pounds. The first photo of her took place in a small and sterile white bed. 011 had a light down of hair covering her tiny head, and was wearing only a diaper. Her skin was nearly transparent, and her bones seemed to stick out of her skin. A black tattoo was already present on her left wrist. Her expression matched one Joyce had seen on El before-she was absolutely terrified. The documents attached to the picture detailed the first year of her life, wherein she was mainly shown in the same bed. Despite this, she passed infant milestones at an earlier age than her own boys had. 011 was able to sit up by the time she was four months old, was crawling at six months, and walking at eight. While she was reaching physical milestones, 011 did not make noises like most infants did. She didn't laugh, she didn't smile, she didn't babble, and she only cried during the tests they performed on her. As a baby, her tests began after six months of age and mostly consisted of supplying her with something she wanted, usually food. They'd give something to her for a few minutes, then take it away and place it just out of her reach. 011 would begin to cry, and during the first few experiments, simply cried herself to sleep. The fourth time, though, they took both food and a toy from her. That time she screamed, and both objects teetered slightly. Immediately afterwards the baby went unconscious, blood trickling from both nostrils. Similar experiments were repeated, but no others were successful. Joyce flipped through the last few pictures in the birth to one file, noting that 011 had blonde hair as a baby, which surprised her due to how dark it was now. In the photo apparently marking her first birthday-oddly, a date was not included-the little girl was standing up, staring up at the photographer with her huge brown eyes, appearing both confused and fearful. She wore a white onesie and was still far too thin for a child that age; there wasn't a trace of baby fat on her. Placing the pictures and documents back inside the first file, Joyce moved on to El's second year of life.

Her hair grew out to curl around her ears. Joyce was surprised they hadn't shaved her head yet and wondered at what age they did. The photo of her at a year and a half old showed the little girl wearing only a white shirt and diaper, playing with a puzzle on a tile floor, much of it completed. The report mentioned that 011 frequently finished puzzles without assistance, but that she still didn't speak or laugh. Due to her fondness for the games, the tests administered at that age included tying her hands behind her back and setting a partially completed puzzle in front of her. The experiment was repeated multiple times, but none were successful; 011 didn't understand what was being asked of her and instead spent the entire time struggling to untie herself, eventually falling asleep on the floor. In the picture documenting her second birthday-again, no date-011 was seen standing in a crib, her light hair curling against the back of her neck. The child's expression was neutral, and she was looking directly into the camera again.

The third file surprised Joyce, because the pictures in it showed 011 with other children of various ages and ethnicities, though she was clearly the youngest. The woman was momentarily shocked, but quickly realized she'd been a fool. Of course there were other children at the lab, why would she be labeled 011 otherwise? In the report, Joyce found no evidence of testing on the child, but instead found that she'd finally begun speaking, and had even laughed. 011 only knew four words, though: 'Papa', 'hungry', 'thirsty', and 'toilet'. At nearly three, she should have had more language than only being capable of asking for basic necessities. Joyce wondered if the other children spoke, and if maybe she only picked up language by being around other kids. While 011 wasn't put through testing, the forms of punishment she received were mentioned, and all of them were appalling. If 011 didn't finish a meal, she wasn't given any food the next day. If she failed to complete a task that was presented to her-putting together a larger, more difficult puzzle in a certain amount of time, an act she only failed twice-she was subjected to an electric shock. If 011 wet her pants or bed, she was placed in a small, dark, solitary cell for twenty-four hours without food or water. The photo documenting her third birthday showed 011 sitting on a crib with one of the bars removed, wearing a white shirt and blue shorts, her light curly hair just reaching the nape of her neck. Her tiny hands were clasped tightly together in the same manner Joyce had seen

before, but there were tears visible in her wide, fearful eyes. By this point the woman had tears in her own as well, but wiped them away quickly before they could drip onto the paper. So many pieces of Eleven's personality made sense to her now, from why she cleaned her plate to her distaste for small spaces. Joyce was absolutely appalled that anyone could treat a child this way, let alone an innocent toddler. She didn't want to read more, but still found herself picking up and opening the fourth file.

Things only got worse from there. The report documented that 011 had not exhibited telekinetic abilities in over a year, and the doctors were growing frustrated. They began extensive physical and medical tests on the child, ranging from taking her blood and scanning her brain to forcing the child to stay awake for long periods of time or run around a track until she was unable to continue. They found that physical exhaustion didn't pry out her abilities, which to Joyce was a no-brainer considering how drained she was *after* using them. While the child's bloodwork came back normal, the scans showed that 011 had very abnormal brain activity. Her right hemisphere and amygdala, which control body movement and emotions like fear, were significantly well developed for her age. However, pieces of her left temporal lobe, which control language development and comprehension were significantly underdeveloped, especially when compared with others her age. While 011 was academically ahead of her peers in accordance to her IQ, she was either unable or unwilling to instigate a social interaction between anyone other than Brenner. She only gained three more words that year-cold, hot, and tired. The photo documenting her fourth birthday nearly broke Joyce's heart in half. They'd just shaved her head for the first time, buzzing off the long blonde curls that had once reached past her shoulders. In this picture, however, 011 wasn't crying, but instead staring emotionlessly at nothing, drowning in only an oversized hospital gown.

By the time the fifth report was documented, 011 had been isolated completely from the children she'd previously associated with. Her only source of contact was Dr. Brenner, who she referred to as Papa. Nurses, doctors, and other scientists were directed to never speak to or acknowledge 011 unless told specifically otherwise. Extensive research on her telepathic and telekinetic abilities were conducted. Even though she hadn't shown any evidence of being capable of such

skills in nearly two years, Dr. Brenner was certain, based both on her brain scans and the fact that she'd done it before that 011 was capable. He believed she simply needed to be forced into using them. Unless she was sleeping, which was in a solitary cell containing only a bed, 011 was in what they called 'training', but after reading, Joyce found it was more like torture. In the first of many tests, she was strapped to a chair with a small table in front of her, only a pen resting upon it. 011 had her arms tied to her sides and her feet buckled against the legs of the chair, unable to move anything but her head. As documented, 011 was terrified when unfamiliar guards restrained her in the chair, and she cried out to Brenner for help. All she received was the sound of his voice over the intercom, telling her that if she could move the pen she would be untied. 011 sat there for over seven hours, unable to complete the task. She was finally let free, only to be detained in the small dark cell because she'd wet herself in the chair. This test was repeated several times, but to no avail. After the first two attempts, 011 realized she'd be subjected to this on a regular basis, and the little girl refused to drink anything for nearly two days. She managed to avoid accidents during later tests and therefore avoid punishment, which is what gave Brenner the bright idea to instill a different fear response in the child. From then on, if 011 did not move the pen, she was subjected to an electric shock. She only failed this test twice, and when she finally succeeded it was because she screamed in fear of being zapped again. When she cried out, the pen rolled slightly in one direction as if someone had blown at it. 011 immediately stopped screaming, unable to make a sound after falling unconscious. When she awoke, the girl was rewarded with a small stuffed lion and attention from Brenner. The final picture in the fifth file showed 011 holding said toy tightly to her chest, still staring emotionlessly.

Apparently that was motivation enough for the girl, because afterwards she began to excel in the experiments. By the time 011 was six-every picture of her now seemed the same, her head was shaved and she was always wearing a hospital gown-she could not only move the pen across the table, she could draw it into her hands or roll it to someone sitting across from her, though directly afterwards she either bled profusely from the nose and ears or fell totally unconscious onto the table. When she was seven, though, Brenner pushed her too hard and she nearly cracked. He attempted to

get 011 to draw something heavier to her, a ten pound dumbbell. After concentrating for over an hour and continuously wiping blood from above her lip, Brenner threatened the girl with an electric shock if she did not succeed. She attempted again, but to no avail, and was punished. After 011 regained her composure, Brenner commanded she try again, sure she was capable of moving the weight. It wasn't until he threatened to send her to the small room that 011 was able to bring the object towards her, and even then it only moved a few inches. Afterwards the child collapsed, blood streaming from her eyes as well. A test was not run on 011 for several days; her energy was so spent that she was unable to walk. After she regained her strength, the experiments continued, but this time with the pen again.

The files began to shrink in size; there wasn't much of a change in 011 besides the bettering of her abilities. The little girl's limited vocabulary hardly expanded-at eight was still unable to form a complete sentence. As she aged, her telekinesis progressed-011 could suspend the pen in mid air and throw it across the room by the time she was nine, and was finally successful in moving the weight just before she turned ten. Joyce was about to open the tenth file when she realized she hadn't checked in on the kids in a while. She stepped inside and found them still asleep, but noticed it was nearing the time that Hopper said he would be returning. Not wanting him to become aware of her snooping either, Joyce placed the Hawkins box back beneath Jim's bed and returned to the porch, intent on actually smoking this time.

As Jim approached the cabin, he spotted a dark silhouette standing outside, the orange end of a lit cigarette barely illuminating the woman's face.

"How was work?" Joyce asked, passing her cigarette to Hopper as he climbed the steps.

He took it gratefully. "Fine, how was El?" he returned, only concerned with one thing.

"Her and Will fell asleep on the couch watching a movie, but I didn't put her to bed because you said you'd wake her up." the woman replied.

"But she was good?"

"Of course, we had fun. Will taught her how to play Hide and Seek."

Hopper chuckled. "Oh yeah? Did she like it?"

"I think so. There were only a few places she would hide."

"What do you mean?"

Joyce took another drag, blowing out smoke as she answered. "Well, Will's pretty good at hiding, you know that," She started, Jim nodding along in understanding. The kid was damn good at hiding, he knew that better than anyone. "Will was trying to get her to hide with him under her bed, or in her closet, or under the sink, but El didn't want to. She would only hide behind her door, or in the bathtub, or between the curtains."

Hopper took the cigarette Joyce passed him before providing an answer. "She does not like small spaces. Sometimes she still doesn't even close the bathroom door all the way. Unless she's mad at me, her bedroom door is always open."

After what she'd read earlier, Joyce wasn't surprised. She figured Hopper had seen the reports as well, but wondered when and how they came into his custody. He found El almost a year ago, did he have this information about her beforehand, or did he acquire it sometime after? Joyce wondered how many of the child's strange behaviors were a surprise to Jim like they'd been to her.

The woman appeared to be deep in thought, and Hopper simply assumed she was waiting for the right time to bring up Eleven's atrocious table manners. "Go ahead, you can say it." he said, handing her the cigarette.

"Say what?" Joyce asked, confused.

"Tell me about how bad her table manners are."

The woman chuckled, remembering El's spaghetti stained jeans. Apparently Hopper did notice. "You mean how *nonexistent* her table manners are, right?" they both laughed. "I mean really, Hop, and she

chews with her mouth open..."

"I know, it's bad, they're bad. That's one reason I was reluctant to have you watch her." Jim said, still smiling.

"Why, were you were worried I'd teach her some?"

Hopper laughed again. "I don't know why I haven't."

"Really, why haven't you?" Joyce asked, this time in all seriousness. "If she's ever going to blend in, she can't eat like that in public."

"I know, it's just...I haven't had to worry about it, she hasn't needed to leave. And I don't care how she eats in front of me. Hell, I probably don't have much better manners myself." The man said.

"But at *some point* she's going to need to learn them, right? Why not now? She's what, twelve, thirteen years old?"

"I guess I just didn't think about it, you know? It doesn't bother me, so I've never brought it up."

"And what about the immodesty thing?" Joyce asked.

"What?" Jim asked, eyebrows furrowing.

"After her bath, El walked back to her room with only a towel around her waist, right in front of Will."

Hopper buried his face in his hands, leaning forward onto the railing but slightly laughing. "God, I'm sorry. I hope she didn't embarrass him too much."

Joyce just smiled and elbowed him playfully. "Wonder who she picked up that habit from, huh."

"At least there wasn't much for Will to see." The man said. "But you're right, we need to talk about it. I just don't know how to bring it up without..." he faltered, struggling for a way to explain.

"Without what? The woman asked.

Jim sighed. "I guess I haven't said anything because I don't want it to seem like I'm disappointed in her, you know?"

Joyce shook her head. "Not really."

"I just wanted everything to seem like it was okay." he tried again. "Especially in the beginning. I wanted to be able to tell her 'yes' as much as possible. I didn't want her to feel like she was weird 'cause she probably thought she was weird enough already." Hopper didn't know if he was making sense, but wasn't sure how else to explain. "I just...I wanted everything to seem *good*, for her to be doing everything right for once. If I said something about her eating habits, I might embarrass her or make her think she's in trouble, or I'm mad at her, and I didn't want that, I *don't* want that. Do you get it?"

This time Joyce nodded in understanding. "Yes, I do. But it's been almost a year now that you've had her, I think it might be time to explain some of these things for her own good."

"How would I even start? 'El, you eat like a pig, stop it?'"

"Start by explaining what's appropriate when you're at home with family and what's appropriate when others are over or when you're somewhere else." Joyce said. "Explain to her that if she's eating dinner at a friends house she should chew with her mouth closed, but if she's at home with family she can eat however she wants."

Hopper was nodding along as she spoke. "But how do I say it without coming across as condescending or demanding?" El didn't like when he gave her specific instructions that had no direct benefit to her, and she especially didn't like being talked down to.

"Well she's not stupid, Hop. She understands that the way she grew up wasn't normal, right?" The man nodded. "Okay, so just explain to her that table manners and modesty are things that she wasn't taught in the lab, but are things she needs to learn in order to blend in and stay safe out here." she explained. Hopper still seemed unconvinced. "Put it like this: if she doesn't use manners and modesty, it might be easier for someone looking for her to find her. Do you underst..?"

"I do, I do understand, it's just..." he interrupted, sighing. "I don't

wanna make her feel anymore like an outsider than she probably already does."

"Then make her understand that you're just trying to help her. That being different isn't a bad thing, it just means she has a lot to learn, and that we're here to help her."

Hopper took another drag but exhaled quickly, trying to determine when the best time to talk to the kid about all this was. If she was practically naked in front of Will tonight, then the conversation needed to happen sooner rather than later. But she was still so damn emotional-hell, she cried over running out of Eggos earlier-so maybe he should wait she was feeling better, when she started sleeping through the night again. Yes, when El wasn't constantly attached to his hip anymore, he would talk to her.

He'd have to. He couldn't have her pulling that shit in front of Wheeler. Just the thought made fists clench.

"Thanks, Joyce. You know, I've wanted to ask for your help a million times over the last year."

"Well, the door is always open now." She replied with a smile, shivering when the wind cut into her jacket and whipped through her hair.

"If this keeps up, we might get snow before Thanksgiving this year." Hopper said, passing the cigarette.

"You two have any plans for Thanksgiving?" Joyce asked.

The man's eyes widened and he shook his head. "No, I haven't thought about it. El might not even know what it is."

"Have you celebrated any holidays with her?"

"Not really." Hopper said. "Well, she made a ghost costume out of a sheet for Halloween, but she didn't go out or anything."

"You're more than welcome to come to our house for Thanksgiving." Joyce offered. She could see Jim about to decline when she corrected herself. "Or we could do it here, as cramped as it would be."

"I'm not very confident in that oven's ability to cook a turkey."

"Oh, come on, Hop! It's El's first real holiday, it should be special."

"Isn't Christmas a better time to do that?" The man replied snarkily. Joyce shot him a look before he continued. "Okay, okay. If you can bring the turkey and ham, El and I can make mashed potatoes and biscuits."

Joyce wrinkled her nose. "Are those the only things you eat on Thanksgiving?"

"Well I guess there's cranberry sauce and the pie..."

"Tell you what; you get the dessert and we'll take care of the rest. Sound good?"

"El's gonna love that deal." Hopper said with a smile.

"Watch out for her fingers, she was dipping into the tomato sauce while we were cooking." she said, passing the cigarette back.

"God, not this again." Jim said, exhaling smoke through his nose. "Note to self: improve El's table manners before Thanksgiving."

"You're damn right."

Movement was suddenly heard from inside, and both adults peered through the kitchen window's thin drapes to see Will standing at the sink, drinking water straight from the tap.

"Guess I should go wake her up like I promised." Hopper said, standing up straight and popping his back. Joyce put out the cigarette on the railing as the two stepped inside, Will turning around to spot them. "Hey, buddy." the man greeted with a smile.

"Hi Hopper." he replied, hair rumpled from sleep.

"You ready to head home, sweetheart?" Joyce asked. Will nodded tiredly.

On the couch, El slept slumped against the armrest, the print of the

fabric already pressing a pattern into the skin of her cheek. Hopper sat on the couch beside her and ran a gentle hand up and down her back. "Hey Kid, I'm home."

The child turned into his touch, face forming a frown as it always did when she first woke up. "It's just me, El."

"Hoppa?" the girl asked as she opened her eyes, rubbing one of them hard with the back of her hand.

He kissed the top of her head. "How was your night, Kid? You have fun?" Eleven nodded, smiling. "What'd you do besides fall asleep?"

"Colored and played Hide and Seek."

"Oh yeah, did you like it?" the man asked, tucking a stray curl behind her ear.

The girl nodded with a smile. "I want to play it with you."

Jim chuckled and pecked her crown again. "Sure, we can do that sometime." Something in his heart clenched with melancholy-El saw it flicker in his eyes. "What did you have for dinner?"

"Spaghetti."

"Was it good?"

"Better than yours."

Everyone laughed, and El sat up when she realized Joyce and Will were still there. They were packing up their stuff, and the clock on the police scanner read 10:27. Will would be tired, and he had school in the morning.

"How 'bout we walk you two out?" Hopper said as he stood, moving to grab the girl a coat. Eleven scampered off the couch and into her room, retrieving sweatpants and socks. Outside, the wind blew a soft chill through the woods, and the kids trotted ahead with a sudden burst of energy as Joyce and Hopper hung back, sharing one last cigarette. Their arms were linked together, but still Joyce shivered in the cold; winter was in the air.

"So," the woman started, teeth lightly chattering. "You're 'Hoppa' now?"

Jim smiled, even felt a rush of heat warm his cheeks. El hadn't addressed him in front of anyone yet, and despite the silliness of the name she'd coined for him, he loved it. "She came up with that one."

"I think it's cute. Are you gonna pursue anything official?" Joyce asked.

"Gotta get her to let me leave again."

The woman smiled. "I can be with her when I have time. And what about the boys? They're out of school pretty early, couldn't they come stay with her too?"

The man took another pull, thinking. "I don't know how often they can be here without sparking suspicion. There's no telling who's still watching them, all of us. Especially now."

"Even more of a reason you need to get back to work. You don't think they won't notice that the police chief involved in all this has been out for almost a week?"

She had a point, and Hopper knew it. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to have people here with her, at least until she's okay with being alone again." He blew out a puff of smoke and smiled as he watched Will almost trip over an overlooked branch, Eleven keeping him upright. "I'm glad they get along."

Joyce nodded in agreeance as her green Pinto come into view. "Me too."

El surprised Will with a big hug goodbye, but Joyce was prepared for a good squeeze and a kiss on the top of her curly head. Hopper wrapped his arms around the girl as they waved goodbye, and swung her onto his hip as Joyce drove past with a smile and a final holler. "Call me about Thanksgiving!"

The child's large brown eyes blinked tiredly up at Hopper. "What's Thanksgiving?"

The man chuckled, turning back towards the warm glow of their cabin. "You're gonna love it, Kid."

14. Chapter 14

Thanksgiving couldn't come fast enough for El. As Hopper had crudely explained, it was, "A day where you get together with people you care about and eat a bunch of really good food." The promise of two of her favorite things was enticing to the girl, and she didn't hesitate to ask Mike about it during their nightly radio calls.

"Thanksgiving is okay I guess, we always have our whole family our house. The food is good, but my mom makes us dress up all nice and me and Nancy have to do all the dishes afterwards." Mike told her, trying to keep the annoyance from his voice. He knew he shouldn't take celebrating the holidays for granted, especially around El. He also desperately wanted to invite her to his house for the occasion, but since his parents still didn't know about her yet, he knew he couldn't. "What are you and Hopper doing?"

"Joyce and Jonathan and Will are coming." she replied into the radio's mouthpiece, rolling over on her bed from her back to her stomach. Hopper had recently moved it into her room for the time being, secretly planning to get her one of the handheld radios the rest of her friends had for Christmas.

"They're coming to the cabin?" Mike asked incredulously.

El nodded, then, remembering he couldn't see her, said, "Yes."

"How're all five of you going to fit at your table?"

El hadn't thought about that. Their dining room table was old and flimsy and barely big enough for her and Hopper. "I don't know." she said, her stomach suddenly knotting in worry. What if they couldn't have Thanksgiving?

"Why don't you go to Will's house?"

"Hop says it's not safe." El replied, glancing into the living room at the man lightly snoring in his chair. Jim often fell asleep watching TV while she talked to Mike.

"But you were there for two days after the Gate!" the boy argued, unable to contain his frustration. Even though he still wasn't happy about it, he understood-not forgiven, but understood-why Hopper kept El hidden for almost a year. That being said, he still didn't understand why the Chief had to continue doing it so strictly. Besides, if anyone came for her now, she'd never let them get to her.

"I know." El said with a sigh, feeling caught in the middle. She understood both sides of the argument; Mike was right and she knew it, but Hopper was only trying to keep her safe, and if there was anyone in the world she trusted to physically protect her if she wasn't able to protect herself, it was him. "Are you coming over tomorrow after school?" the girl asked to change the subject.

"Oh, yeah, totally." Mike replied enthusiastically. "Dustin's coming too. He says he has something for your room."

"What is it?"

"He wouldn't tell me, he said it's a surprise."

El was about to respond when Hopper's unexpected voice outside her door made her jump. "Time for pajamas, Kid."

"I'm wearing them."

Jim paused a moment, "Well..then it's time to brush your teeth."

El groaned before speaking into the radio again. "I have to go."

"Yeah me too, my mom is yelling at me to come upstairs. We can talk before school tomorrow."

"Okay. Goodnight, Mike."

"Night, El."

A few chapters into their new nightly book, El interrupted Hopper suddenly with a very unrelated question. "Our table is too small."

Jim frowned in confusion. "Too small for what?"

"Thanksgiving."

The man chuckled lightly. "What're you worrying about our table for? Everything is gonna work out fine, Kid."

"We only have two chairs." she said aloud as she came to the conclusion. "We need five."

"El, look at me," Hopper said, putting the book on her nightstand. "Thanksgiving isn't for another week, we have plenty of time to get what we need. I'm sure Joyce could bring over some chairs, she might even have an extra table we can borrow."

The child considered this for a moment before firing another question at him. "Will you make me...dress up?"

"You mean wear nice clothes?" the man asked. El nodded. "You can if you want to, but I won't make you."

"Will you make me do all the dishes?"

This time Hopper belted a laugh. "When in the hell have I ever made you do all the dishes?"

"Mike has to."

Finally Jim nodded in understanding. "Ah. Does Mike have to dress up on Thanksgiving?"

"Yes."

Hopper sighed, thinking through an explanation. "Everybody has different traditions on Thanksgiving."

"Traditions?"

"Something you do over and over again. It's our tradition to read together before bed."

"What is our tradition for Thanksgiving?"

Jim smiled, ruffling her hair. "I don't know yet. We'll have to start

some."

As the week dragged on, El learned more and more about Thanksgiving from her friends. During the afternoons when her friends came to visit on Tuesday and Wednesday, the party After school one day, the boys taught El how to draw a turkey by tracing your hand, and when Hopper got home the whole house was covered in them.

While crafting, they explained and shared their own personal Thanksgiving traditions. Dustin and his mom always traveled to see his grandparents for three days in Indianapolis, Lucas' mom and sister watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade while he and his dad play football outside, and despite it not being his favorite holiday, Mike did admit to enjoying cracking the wishbone with Holly.

When Eleven asked what a wishbone was, the conversation began gearing towards favorite foods; Dustin loved cranberry sauce, Lucas and Erica always fought over the last of the ham, and Mike's mom made extra gravy and mashed potatoes just for him.

On the days that Joyce stayed with her-Monday's, Thursdays, and Friday's-they talked about what it meant to be thankful for what you have. Joyce used examples like her kids, her home, her car, her job, "And of course you and Hop!"

El pondered a while, unsure of what to say. She was thankful for everything, right down to her clean, dry socks. When she finally spoke, Joyce had to bite her lip to hold back tears. "I'm thankful...to not be in the Lab."

The woman wrapped El in her arms tightly. "Me too."

The day before Thanksgiving, a strong windstorm blew through Hawkins. Fences and trees went down, multiple areas of town lost power, and Hopper was out all day cleaning up the mess. He was almost an hour late arriving home, feeling horrible when he remembered that El had been alone for longer than planned. Between either Joyce or the boys visiting her while Hopper was gone, El now had company over more often than not. The man knew that Mike had been there earlier after school as he almost always was, but it was

well into the evening now, and his bike wasn't on the porch when Jim knocked on the door.

As he climbed the steps, he noted that the cabin was dark inside. When he knocked, El answered immediately and hugged him tightly when he stepped inside. Hopper couldn't tell if El was shaking in his arms because she was scared or because she was cold, but he could see their breath in small puffs. She was wearing her thickest coat and wrapped in a throw blanket with two pairs of socks under her slippers. Though the wood stove had a small fire burning, serving as the only light, it did little to warm the drafty old cabin.

"Hey, it's okay, Kid. It was probably just the wind storm, a lot of people in town lost power today." Jim tried to reassure her. "I'm sorry I'm so late. How long have you been here alone?"

"Mike went home at six-thirty."

It was well after eight by then. "When did the power go out?"

"After he left." El said thoughtfully, and after a moment, "I heard something loud."

The man sighed. "I'm sorry, kiddo. You're probably hungry, huh?"

She nodded. "And cold."

Hopper hugged the girl tighter. "Well, shit."

He didn't know what to do. They couldn't make dinner if the power was out, and if a tree took the power out, it was late and cold and dark, and Hopper wasn't about to go out to try and fix it. Jim considered his options carefully. They could stay here and try to find something to eat without needing to cook it-which he didn't really think would work. He could risk taking her to his trailer for the night-which he didn't really want to do. Or he could call Joyce. He knew immediately which option both himself and El would prefer, but he hated the thought of inconveniencing Joyce in any way. Still, though, what else was there to do? Make about a million PB&J's for dinner and sleep next to the wood stove for warmth?

The man rubbed a heavy hand across his face and sighed loudly

again, looking down at the child. "Okay, get some shoes on and let's walk to the truck so we can call Joyce."

Eleven's face lit up and she scrambled to find her shoes, replacing the blanket with another coat. It wasn't snowing outside, but it was below freezing, and the sharp wind cut straight to the bone. El alternated holding each of Hopper's warm hands on the walk to the blazer, and when they got inside, the man turned the heat on full blast and reached for his radio.

"Hello, Will, can you hear me, kid?" Hopper said, pausing for a moment before reiterating, "Will, are you there?"

He was met with only radio silence, but before he could ask again, a small voice replied, "Chief?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's me. Is your mom home?"

"Yeah..." Will replied, feeling nervous. Why was Hopper calling this late and asking for his mom?

"Can I talk to her?"

"Um, sure, hold on."

There was some shuffling, the sound of muffled speaking, and then Joyce was on the line. "Hop? "

"Hey, Joyce. Do you guys have power?"

"Yeah, we've been fine all today." Joyce replied. "What about you two?"

"I just got back from work and the power went out on the kiddo over an hour. I don't think it's something I can fix overnight, and it's cold as hell at the cabin and..."

"Hop," Joyce said, stopping his words. "Come over. You were already going to be here in the morning tomorrow anyway. We have some leftovers from dinner and you two can crash on the couch."

"Are you sure? I don't wanna impose."

"I invited you!" she scolded playfully.

"Okay, okay, we'll be over soon. Thank you, Joyce."

He could hear her smile through the line. "No problem."

Eleven was bubbling with anticipation when Hopper ended the call. "Alright Kid, let's go pack."

"We can stay the night?" He nodded, and her smile stretched from ear to ear. "Pack?"

"Get everything we need together." Jim explained. "What do you think we should bring with us tonight?"

El answered immediately. "My toothbrush."

The man laughed and ruffled her hair. "Absolutely. What else?"

"Pajamas?"

"Yep. And clothes for tomorrow."

"And Eggos!"

It took the pair a good fifteen minutes to gather the necessities. Hopper had to climb up to the loft in the near dark to search for any kind of overnight bag for the two of them. El apparently could not go without a pillow and blanket from her bed, her stuffed bear, or their current nightly book. Jim discreetly packed an extra set of pajamas for the child in case she had an accident, and made sure to grab her Eggos and the two store bought pies he hoped Joyce would think were homemade. El was practically bouncing out of her seat during the drive there, and it was just after nine when they rang the Buyer's bell, both of their arms full.

Joyce laughed when she opened the door, able to see only the top of Eleven's head. "Are you guys staying for one night or one month?"

"I'm not the one who insisted on bringing her whole damn bed." Hopper retorted as he ushered the child inside. He immediately made to close the curtains, only to find that Joyce had already done it.

"No!" El argued, her words muffled. "Just my blanket and pillow!"

"You can put your stuff down on the couch, sweetheart." Joyce said. "Are you guys hungry?"

"Yes." El said, dropping her belongings before crossing to the woman for a hug.

"Jonathan brought home pizza after work, so help yourself, there's plenty left." Joyce said as she gave the girl a squeeze. She was the only other person besides Mike that El always hugged upon first sight.

Jonathan was already in the kitchen, and having overheard, dished the pair up as they entered. Will, who was drawing in his room when Hopper and El arrived, he joined them with a smile. The chief gave him a good natured hair tousle and El returned his grin, digging hungrily into a piece of pepperoni pizza.

"Hey El, me and Will rented a movie if you wanna watch with us. We're making popcorn, too." Jonathan offered when the girl finally seemed satiated after three pieces of pizza.

"Yes." she replied eagerly, though she wasn't a huge fan of popcorn; Hopper always burned it.

"What did you guys pick out?" Joyce asked.

"Gremlins." Will answered. "We haven't seen it yet."

"Is that the one with those little furry things?" Hopper said. Both boys nodded. He turned to El. "Alright, go put your pajamas on in case you fall asleep."

"I won't fall asleep!" the girl replied defiantly, though it was approaching her usual bedtime.

He just gave the girl a knowing glance and she threw her head back in acquiescence, knowing that in all likelihood Hopper was probably right. Will got the movie ready while Jonathan made popcorn on the stove, and El was pleasantly surprised by how good it was when it wasn't scorched, a fact she didn't hesitate making perfectly clear to

Hopper, who sat at the kitchen table with Joyce and smoked a cigarette after cigarette. The woman seemed thrilled to have them over; she was. Joyce didn't think she'd be able to bear spending another season with just the boys and their traditions after she'd told Bob so much about them and had been so excited to experience them with him. She needed a distraction, and what better one than to celebrate a child's first holiday?

True to the man's prediction, El fell asleep between Will and Jonathan less than an hour in. When the movie was finished and the boys had gone to bed, Hopper gently woke her so she could brush her teeth and use the bathroom. Joyce was finishing the dishes in the kitchen, and came in to say goodnight to the girl as Jim tucked her back in.

"Do you need anything, sweetheart? Another blanket? A glass of water?" the woman asked, tucking a curl behind El's ear. She just shook her head, rubbing her eyes tiredly. "Okay." Joyce said with a kiss on the forehead. "Let me know if you two need anything."

Hopper smiled. "Thanks again, Joyce."

"You're welcome. Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Jim and El said quietly in unison. The man gave her one last tuck, a second kiss on the forehead, and retired to the chair where he'd attempt any form of sleep.